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DON MAC GRATH

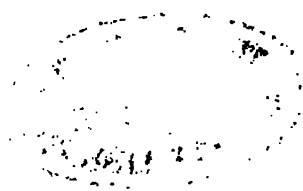
RANDALL
PARRISH



A
TALE OF
THE RIVER



DON MAC GRATH







Don liked the sunset hour with Laila best of all

[PAGE 119]

DON MAC GRATH

A TALE OF THE RIVER

BY

RANDALL PARRISH

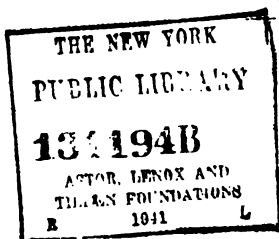
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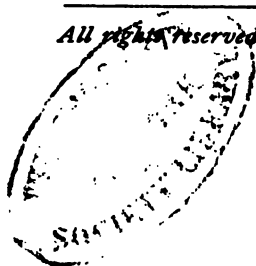
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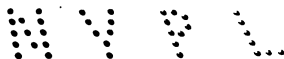
DON MAC GRATH

A TALE OF THE RIVER

Chapter I

THE RUNAWAY

THE dingy old freighter *Comet* rested, nose pointing up stream, hard against the Illinois shore, frayed cables flapping as she strained to break away, while a gang of perspiring roustabouts, picturesque in dirt and tatters, rushed the cordwood on board, stowing it conveniently away along the lower guard, constantly inspired to more diligent action by the energetic remarks of the red-faced mate. About the gangway all was bustle, noise, and confusion; everywhere else reposed a peaceful silence. The sunlight lay hot and golden over both river and shore, excepting where the narrow fringe of wood shadowed the upper bank, and extended down a shallow gully nearly opposite the



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Comet's silent wheel. That was where the boy sat, at the very edge of the water, his eyes on the moving figures, endeavoring to make up his mind.

He would not have been a badly appearing boy had he only been neatly dressed and clean, for he possessed honest eyes of dark gray, which looked forth fearlessly from beneath long lashes, and a certain firmness of mouth and chin, well worth noting as indicative of strong character. Yet these favorable points might have been overlooked easily by a careless observer seeing merely the rough, uncombed hair protruding from beneath the wide brim of a badly torn straw hat, the freckles on the cheeks, the somewhat prominent nose, the bare feet, the coarse hickory shirt, and patched brown jean trousers.

The few remaining sticks of cordwood had been safely stored away on board, and the mate alone remained ashore, arguing vehemently with old Haines over the price. It was then that the boy arrived at a final decision. No one was looking his way; the tired roustabouts were clustered on the forward lower deck, and the Captain was leaning forth from the pilot house window waiting for the



THE RUNAWAY

mate to cast off. Unobserved by any of these the lad slipped silently down into the water, waded in closer beneath the protecting shadow of the motionless wheel, and then drew himself slowly along the outer guard until he discovered an opening through which he crawled inboard to a spot of safety behind the boilers. Three hours later the red-faced mate, hunting after a spare chain, discovered him there, curled up on the hard deck fast asleep. The man stared at the intruder doubtfully through the dim light, then prodded him roughly with his foot.

"Hullo, kid! Where did you come from?"

The voice was sufficiently gruff, yet rather more suggestive of surprise than anger. The half-awakened boy straightened up, rubbing his eyes.

"I — I crawled in here back at Haines' Landing, sir."

"I reckon that's right, son; thought I remembered seeing you-all hangin' round thar. Skipped fer good?"

The boy nodded silently, his observant eyes on the mate's face. The latter spat through the opening out into the river, both hands buried deep within his pockets.

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"You ain't one o' old Bill Haines' kids, are you?"

"Naw," and the boy's voice had a tinge of derision in its tones. "I 've been mussellin' down thar below the bend."

"Oh! Along with that MacGrath outfit?"

"Yep."

"What you goin' ter quit 'em fer?"

The gray eyes darkened, the firm lines of the mouth setting hard.

"'Cause they 're fightin', cussin', and drinkin' all the time. I just got plum tired ter death. I reckon I 'd rather try it fer a while alone."

The mate laughed.

"Well, you ain't bettered yerself much, kid, comin' on board the ol' *Comet*, if that 's what you 're runnin' away fer. We-all ain't runnin' no Sunday school yere. Still, I dunno; that MacGrath outfit is 'bout the toughest gang 'long the river, and sure no place fer a boy to be brought up. How long you been with 'em?"

"Raised thar, I reckon; leastwise I 've been pickin' shells 'bout as far back as I kin remember."

The mate's hands came out of his pockets.

"So!" incredulously. "Be you a MacGrath?"

THE RUNAWAY

"I dunno; they all called me Don MacGrath, and I reckon they knew."

There was that in the boy's tone which ended the mate's questioning. He spat again out through the opening into the river, reaching down to pick up his chain.

"Well, it's none o' my funeral," he said at last, gruffly, "only we ain't feedin' fellers on the ol' *Comet* that don't earn their grub. Hustle along forrard thar, an' take hol' lively when I call fer hands; we've got another landin' ter make afore dark."

Young MacGrath knew the river, and its ways, both in its harshness and its beauty. Rough as his early training had been, utterly devoid of all uplifting influence, all educational advantages, he still possessed a nature quick to respond to any form of kindness. He recognized a certain restrained sympathy now in the mate's gruffness, and his gray eyes were moist as he picked his way forward past the shadow of the hot boilers, toward where the men were clustered on the forward deck. The *Comet* was slowly drawing in toward the Iowa shore, the gang of roustabouts crawling forth from

DON MAC GRATH

their holes in readiness for the landing. They greeted the first appearance of the newcomer after the manner of their kind, with rude jokes, and rough horse-play. For all this the boy cared nothing, smiling back at them in good humor, quick to make return, yet with a glint in his gray eyes which kept practical joking from going too far. And the mate silently watched the scene from the stairs leading to the upper deck, while the *Comet* puffed slowly in toward the landing.

It was largely farm machinery which went ashore here, much of it heavy and awkward to handle, requiring the services of several men to each piece. MacGrath tailed on with the others, asking no favors, but the mate interfered, cursing vociferously, and after that the boy trotted back and forth bearing the lighter articles, his hardened feet impervious to the splinters of the landing stage, or the stones of the levee. It was growing quite dusk as the boat swung free once again into the swift river current, and night lay dark about them by the time the crew had partaken of their coarse evening meal. A nearly full moon brightened the wide expanse of waters, leaving the shore lines

THE RUNAWAY

black on either side. Away off to the north, around a wide bend, the lights of a steamer coming down stream began to glow, dodging along behind a fringe of trees. Occasionally a glare of red from the opened furnace doors gave weird reflection to both water and sky. The roustabouts gathered together on the forward deck, and two negroes danced in the moonbeams to the sound of a squeaking fiddle, while another group, white and black intermingled, shot craps farther astern beneath the flicker of a deck lantern, their faces eager, their voices often quarrelsome.

None of these amusements appealed to the boy. This was merely the same sort of life he had already seen so much of, and grown disgusted with. It might again attract him at some other time, in some other mood, but not now. He would never have reasoned as to the cause probably, yet it was this desire to escape which soon sent him creeping in beneath the protecting shadow of the landing stage, where he lay back alone, resting against a coil of rope, with eyes gazing out on the moonlit river. Don was not greatly accustomed to either dreaming or thinking; neither had hitherto been

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part of his life. He had simply existed, a certain dull revolt at his daily experiences smoldering in his heart. The broader, better life had never truly called him, for he knew it not; it was merely an ill-defined disgust which had led to the final breaking of old ties. He thought about all this now, the memory coming back to him in snatches, as he watched the vague shadow of the shore line creep by. He felt no regret for the past, and scarcely possessed any hope for the future. He had simply drifted from out one environment into another; there had been no real advance, except possibly in the attainment of a wider personal liberty, and, even in this, no true ambition uplifted him above his class, or those with whom he associated.

What was there, either before or behind, to arouse aspiration, or to stimulate ambition? All his life long he had known nothing beyond the river, and the very humblest phase of river life. There were three of the MacGraths, all brothers, the old woman, Tom MacGrath's wife, and two boys. He had met with others surely during the course of their wanderings, roustabouts and dredgers, pearl fishers and buyers, scum of the

THE RUNAWAY

river bottoms, and such as he would occasionally come in contact with at those little isolated river towns where they did their small trading. But mostly his horizon had been bounded by the breadth of the river, the dirty scow in which they lived, the smaller boats from which they worked, the spot ashore where they opened their shells. He could read a little, spelling out the bigger words slowly, but his only conception of pleasure was associated with drunkenness, or the cheap circus of the river towns. This was the breadth of his mental horizon, and yet the boy was essentially clean-minded, clean-lipped, and thoughtful, within the limitations of his knowledge. He possessed no inclination now for any higher life than he already knew; but rather for a wider one — he wanted to see and feel what existed outside the narrow limits of Tom MacGrath's camp. There were no love ties to sever, his only memory being of blows, curses, and hard work; whatever the future might bring, it could certainly prove no worse than the past. Anyway the boy experienced no burden of responsibility — he merely drifted, glad to realize that he was at last going somewhere. He merely wondered if they

DON MAC GRATH

would miss him, that was all. Then he remembered that last blow which Tom MacGrath had struck him, and the gray eyes grew dark with resentment, and his hands clinched. The steamer bound downward passed them, a large passenger boat, the cabin windows shining brightly, the music of an orchestra stealing softly across the intervening waters. Then there remained nothing to break the dull monotony of the night but the chug, chug of the old *Comet* laboring against the current, and those shadowy shores slipping silently past. The boy was tired; his head rested back against the rope coil, and so he fell asleep.

Two hours later the mate routed out a dozen of the hands from the dark corners where they rested motionless, and set them at swinging the huge landing stage over to the opposite side of the deck. They went at the work awkwardly, stumbling around in the dark, half asleep, and swearing savagely. No one among them observed the sleeping boy, or gave him a thought. Slowly, as the great stage swung out over the guard, it drew him undisturbed along with it, and then, as it finally

THE RUNAWAY

lifted clear, he went head-first overboard, falling as silently into the water as a dropped stone. The great stage creaked dismally, and the unconscious *Comet* went chugging on up stream.

Chapter II

DON DISCOVERS A PARTNER

THE lad awoke suddenly to a struggle for life in the swift current, the first thought coming to him being that he must get beyond the stroke of the wheel. Utterly without fear, except for this, he struck out through the black water, wasting no breath in even a single cry, as the boat went chugging past, leaving him tossing like a cork in the choppy waves astern. The *Comet* seemed to fade away, her dingy stern lights blinking dimly, the sound of her engines growing constantly fainter, as the boy was swept swiftly down stream, almost lost in the waste of waters. He could barely distinguish either shore, that to his left being apparently the nearer, but the sweep of the current bore him steadily away from it toward the Illinois side. After a few moments of ineffectual struggle he ceased effort, lying face up to the stars, permitting himself to drift with the surging waters.

A PARTNER

The first shock over, the boy cared but little for the adventure. Barefooted, almost as much at home in the water as a fish, no conception of danger haunted him — only the loneliness and dreariness of it all affected his spirits. He would land somewhere in time, and the particular spot made small difference in his condition — he could curl up and rest, the sun would dry his clothing, and food would come from somewhere. His was the philosophy of boyhood, and of hope. Floating on his back brought no strain on the muscles, and he rested, barely moving his limbs, his eyes on the stars, his ears listening to the noises borne to him along the surface of the waters. They were but the usual sounds of the night, although sometimes echoing strangely through the stillness. Odd things, bits of driftwood, floated with him, yet none came near of sufficient size to lay hold upon. The intense loneliness, the black, ghostly shore line, the continual splash of water, the gloom above and about, weighed upon him. He began to imagine and become terrorized, even while realizing it all as visions of the brain. A hoot owl on the bank startled him; a forked limb outlined against the sky was like a

DON MAC GRATH

beckoning hand; a bit of driftwood striking his face felt like the touch of an icy finger. His nerves tingled, and his teeth clinched to keep back a cry.

The swirl of the swift current bore him nearer and nearer the Illinois shore, which seemed a barren, desolate stretch of sand, relieved only by an occasional gnarled tree, bent into fantastic shape by wind. Nowhere did a light gleam, or any sign of habitation appear. Lying as he was, with eyes eagerly searching the dimly revealed bank, he was not aware of the bit of land directly ahead until his feet touched the sand, and the water broke about him in little waves. It was a sand-bar jutting out to the north of a small island, densely covered by low bushes. The boy waded ashore, the night air chilling him as it struck through his soaked garments. There was no use striving to penetrate the thicket of brush in that darkness, so as soon as he recovered his sense of direction, he began circling the island, following the shore line to the left. Only a narrow expanse of water, apparently deep but with little current, separated him from the mainland. The island trended still closer

A PARTNER

at its southern extremity, and the boy, as he advanced, began to distinguish objects along the opposite bank.

There were trees, a grove of them, and beyond a little cluster of buildings, vaguely outlined against the sky line. He could not make out exactly what they were, but the tallest resembled a grain elevator, and down nearer the water was a long shed, with a wharf boat in front. Underneath the shadow of the high bank, with the grove shadowing all behind, blazed a cheerful fire, lighting up the nearby sand and water, and revealing a recumbent figure peacefully outstretched in slumber. Don was still staring at this dim picture when a train flashed suddenly about a curve, and tore past, making no stop, but the electric headlight of the engine glaring over the silent buildings, and sending its rays far down the track. It was a long passenger, the windows of the day coaches bright, the Pullmans a mere black shadow as they hurtled by. Behind gleamed the red lanterns until they winked out in the dark, the roar of the wheels still reverberat-

DON MAC GRATH

ing along the river. The sleeper by the fire never stirred, and MacGrath waded out into the water, and swam sturdily for the shore.

He came out a few yards below the fire, and drew cautiously toward the slumberer. The firelight fell almost directly on the man's upturned face. The boy liked the looks of it. He was tired and wet, and sat down where the fire could dry his clothes, and where he could watch the unconscious sleeper. The fellow slept like a child, his head pillowed upon one arm, every muscle relaxed in perfect rest. He was of medium size, not badly dressed, and apparently about thirty years of age, his countenance expressive of good humor. He had black curling hair, a clear complexion, and was clean shaven except for a small black moustache, which shaded rather than covered his upper lip. He looked so incongruous a figure amid these surroundings that the boy was puzzled, and sat wondering, as he continued to gaze. The intentness of his stare must have been felt, for the sleeper became uneasy, and finally awoke, sitting up, and stretching hands above his head. His eyes rested instantly upon his watcher, all suggestion of sleep vanished.

A PARTNER

"Ah! I felt thy presence even in my deepest slumber," he exclaimed dramatically. "By what authority hast thou invaded the sanctity of the chamber?"

Too astounded to formulate reply, the boy could only stare at him with open mouth.

"Hath not the language plain meaning to thine ears, my son? Or doth the very sight of me cause thy tongue to cleave unto the roof of thy mouth? Prithee, I beg thee speak — from whence comest thou, mysterious wanderer of the night?"

"I — I fell overboard from a boat last night," MacGrath stammered in explanation, dimly comprehending the inquiry. "I came ashore on that island, and swam across here."

"Ah! the plot becomes clear; the curtain rises to the second act; enter Mark Dean."

Some memory came to the boy, giving him a thought.

"Are you an actor?" he asked eagerly.

"By my halidom, thou art a lad of parts, of wide discrimination, and observant withal. 'Tis true that I have trod the boards to instruct the multitude. I have been the lean and hungry Cassius,

DON MAC GRATH

and, as well, the pious Uncle Tom. But of all this, anon. Prithee, 't is a gay life; 't is pity one must waste so fair time in sleep. But what are your needs, comrade? Rest, drink, food? Thou hast but to command."

"I 'd like to dry my clothes here by the fire, that 's all."

"All! And thinkest that to be the limit of my hospitality? Perish the ignoble thought. 'T is true we must abide the dawn, and the gift of some rustic, ere we break our fast. 'T is the path of genius. Yet I possess still some of the nectar of the gods, in which to drink our better acquaintance."

He busied himself about the fire, raking the hot ashes into place, and half burying two tin cans in the red glow of the coals, still keeping up a continual flow of conversation, to which the boy listened with open mouth, scarce comprehending the meaning of the strange words.

"'T is a curious world, my masters. Ay! but genius lives above the clouds, and laughs to scorn the puny troubles of lesser men. To-night a fire and a cup, good fellowship and many a merry quip

A PARTNER

of the tongue, while with the coming dawn hope beckons, for somewhere a breakfast waits. Hast *wanderlust*, my son, or art thou merely a traveller from necessity?"

MacGrath shook his head, but the other scarcely paused for answer.

"'T is odd disease born of a dissatisfied soul. I have known those who loved the open, sought the wild. But for me, my heart yearneth after the flesh-pots, and civilization calls me to her bosom. I but pause here now, amid this sylvan scene, on my way to a distant city. 'T was no choice of mine, but the heartless act of an auburn-haired brakeman, who drove me from a resting place upon the trucks. Man's inhumanity to man makes countless millions mourn. Yet even misfortune often hath its recompense — the accident of the night hath given me a friend."

He plucked the can from out the coals, poured part of its contents into another, and placed it before the boy.

"Drink, pretty creature, drink, and as we thus refresh the inner man we will converse withal, and plan the conquests of the morrow. Hast home and

DON MAC GRATH

friends, ambition and a dream? Or art thou merely driftwood on the sea of life?"

"I 'm afraid I don't know what you mean," confessed the boy, venturing to taste the contents of his can, but with eyes still fastened on his companion.

"Ah, I see; I must pluck the wings of fancy, and return to earth. To tell the truth, it will relieve me thus to fall."

He drank the half of his can, seemingly dropping the mask of pretence as he did so. When he again spoke his whole voice and manner had changed, although a trace of the stage yet clung to his language.

"And now to business, lad. First let me hear your story."

He lay back to listen, resting against the bank, and puffing at his pipe. The dull light of the fire fell on his face, revealing his good humor, as he smiled carelessly across at the boy. He had a way with him to inspire confidence, and MacGrath related his simple tale with scarcely an interruption. As he concluded, the other ventured a few questions, and then stretched out his hand.

"'T is well, comrade," he commented genially.

A PARTNER

"Thou art also a soldier of fortune, and I welcome you to the army. We will campaign together, if your wishes accord with mine. But first, listen while I unfold my tale of woe."

He settled himself in comfort, pulling at the short hairs of his moustache, and staring up at the stars.

"I was not always thus," with a wave of the hand to indicate his surroundings, "nor can I truthfully proclaim that choice hath brought me here. Comparisons are odious, yet was I born of rich but honest parents, and brought up in the lap of luxury. I will not dwell on details of my meteoric career, but merely outline how I ascended as a rocket to come down like a stick. From an Eastern home of luxury I had one year at Yale, departing thence in some disgrace, but without regret on my part, as this failure led to an appointment at Annapolis. The life there suited me sufficiently so that I succeeded in graduating, and later I served three years at sea. Following this came an experience I care not to dwell upon, but which cost me my commission, and sent me adrift. 'T was no dishonor, lad, for I resigned of my

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own free will, but whatever I had of ambition and high ideal perished, and I became a derelict, even as you see me now. Since then have I played many parts, from common laborer to civil engineer, from unshaven tramp to gentleman of leisure, yet ever with the spirit of *wanderlust* dragging at my anchor. Finally I fell into company with Madame Pauline Devine travelling the Middle West circuit in *repertoire*. From a mere thinking part in her marvellous company of artists I quickly advanced to the responsibilities of leading man. 'T was not so bad while things went well, but a month ago we struck a frost, and finally the manager and Madame departed, leaving the rest of us upon the cold, cold world. 'T was a most inhospitable town wherein we stranded, and there was much tearing of hair and gnashing of teeth. I alone possessed a few simoleons, but when I had fed the remnant twice, and purchased tickets to St. Louis for the soubrette and the first old lady, but fifteen measly cents remained of all my hoard. It well behooved me to take the road, to use my wits, and seek for pastures new. Some fate infernal sent me hither; a heartless

A PARTNER

brakie urged me to alight in yonder sand; and, feeling greatly the need of repose, I slept the sleep of innocence, when aroused by your approach to the duties of hospitality. This then, is my simple tale, fair sir, and by its telling I beseech your friendship. Poor as it seems you might do worse than link your fate with Mark Dean."

The reckless good nature of the man appealed to MacGrath. He had never met a character like this, and his very loneliness drew him to the fellow. Without hesitation he related more in detail his own experience, while Dean leaned back against the bank smoking steadily, his eyes on the boy's face.

"Good; we'll hit it off together, kid. You'll bring me luck."

There was a pause; then MacGrath asked, "Where are we? What town is this?"

Dean yawned sleepily. "Colton is the name painted on the depot. Just a hole in the wall, with no night operator. Passenger trains don't stop; occasionally a freight does — to get water. By all the gods, there's one rounding the curve now. Get up the bank, boy, and lie low behind those bushes."

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They crept up together, crouching low to escape the glare of the headlight, as the heavy train rumbled along the track, the wheels grinding under the application of brakes. It came to a stop with engine opposite the water tank. The black silhouette of the brakeman disappeared, as he clambered down a ladder on the opposite side, and the two vagrants stole along the train, Dean testing the doors hastily. Farther back, a lantern winked, revealing the approach of another train hand in their direction.

"Everything sealed," announced the actor gloomily, "and a brakie coming. It's us for the bumpers, kid, if we travel. Here, up with you, and hold fast."

They found footing and a hand grasp; there was a blast of the engine whistle, a sound of footsteps on top, a man leaping across the opening above them, and then a jerk as the train got under way. They rolled slowly past the red embers of the deserted fire and then, faster and faster, swept forth into the black night.

Chapter III

A WOMAN'S FACE

THE early gray dawn was in the eastern sky when the train rolled into the crowded yards of a small city nestled along the river bank, and extending back up the bordering bluffs. They passed huge piles of lumber, and numerous factories, not yet beginning to awaken for their day's work, the streets quiet and deserted, with lights dimly flickering. As the cars stopped the two released their hold, and clambered down, stiff and grimy, stamping their feet to get the blood circulating, as they took survey of their surroundings. Not far away was a water tank, overflowing, the excess running in streams down the glistening sides. Dean made for it, and catching some of the flood in his hollowed hands, perfected a hasty toilet, drying his face with a handkerchief, and producing a small pocket comb which he ran through his short curls.

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"Go at it, kid," he advised, "cleanliness is next to godliness we are told; besides, it will wake you up."

Without such great faith in the efficiency of water the boy, however, followed advice, and was vigorously scrubbing his face, when a disreputable looking tramp shuffled around the tank, and stopped to stare at the two with evident disapproval.

"Hello," he grunted gloomily, "just got in?"

Dean smiled genially, polishing his hat on a sleeve.

"By means of yon special train we have arrived, friend, and now await the reception committee. Do I address the chairman?"

The fellow drew back a step, eying the speaker with evident suspicion.

"Go easy, bo," he growled. "I never went to no college. Ye'll get a reception all right if the cops spot yer — they're fierce in this burg."

"Ah, Liberty! what crimes are committed in thy name. I judge then your experience in this fair city has been unfortunate. I beg you speak

A WOMAN'S FACE

clearly, frankly; tell me all; explain, describe, elucidate."

The tramp drew back until only his head protruded cautiously around the tank.

"I reckon ye 're nutty; clear bugs," he growled, "but I 'll tell ye this — they jugged me fer pan-handlin'; an' just give me an hour ter git out o' town in. If you-uns are on ther same lay ye better work ther hill thar, an' dodge the cops. I 'm goin' north myself."

The long freight began to move slowly, and the fellow, with a hasty glance in both directions to make sure he was unobserved, grasped a rod, swung himself under a car, and crawled into position on a brake beam. It was a risky job, but done so quickly, and with such precision, that MacGrath scarcely comprehended how it had been accomplished. Dean laughed, and waved his hand.

"Good luck," he cried. "You 're an old-timer all right."

The two stood watching until the way-car rumbled past, leaving the main tracks unoccupied. It was gray dawn, the switch lamps still burning, with

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only a few moving figures visible around the distant depot. Everything about was gloomy and depressing, objects appearing distorted in the weird light. Rows of freight cars obstructed the view in every direction, and a noisy switch engine was at work a hundred yards below. Dean took one glance at all this, and, beckoning the boy to follow, skirted a line of empty box cars, until he found an opening between them, and then made for the nearest street which ran up the bluff. A lumber yard extended along one side, and he discovered a bit of grass concealed between two huge piles of shingles.

"You stay here where I can find you easy, kid," he said kindly, all professional pretence gone, "and I'll see what I can rustle for breakfast. This is the best time in the day—the night cops just going off duty, and the hired girls getting to work. They're generally easier than their mistresses. I'll be back in an hour with enough to last us all day."

He strolled away whistling, his hands buried in his pockets, hat tilted on the back of his head, apparently care-free, and pleased with the prospect.

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MacGrath watched him climb the long hill, then lay back on the soft grass and fell asleep. He remained undisturbed, no demands of the lumber business calling men in that direction, and was still slumbering when Dean climbed the fence, the pockets of his coat bulging, and stole into the nook between the shingle piles. The rustle of paper as he emptied his pockets awakened the sleeper, and the latter sat up, rubbing his eyes.

"I see you've improved the time, lad," said the man, evidently in the best of humor, "and so have I. What's more, I've decided to take a whole day's vacation, and thus enjoy life. I confess that earlier I had a crazy notion of hunting after work, but why should I labor while friends are so kind? Cold meat, bread, even pie, have been actually forced upon me, and Nature urges me to rest and recruit depleted strength. High on yonder hill I found a paradise filled with hired girls who love their fellow man. But twice was I turned away in stony silence, in heartless scorn, and only once did a remorseless dog hasten my dignified retreat. Did I but dare use these dry shingles for a fire we would feast like kings. However, we will refresh the

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inner man, and be content. Ye gods, it is a fair feast, and this red hair imbedded within the pie crust doth bring again to mind the rosy damsel who thus honored me. I will wear it in my coat as guerdon for the day, inspired thus to knightly deeds of honor. Besides, 't is safer there than in the stomach. Be still, my fluttering heart, be still! Fear not, dear friend, but brick red hair doth always thus affect me, and she whose head this slender fragment once adorned dismissed me with a smile whose chaste beauty lingereth yet in memory. Ships that pass in the night never to meet again. Her name was Cynthia — Cynthia, son; heardest thou ever before a word so filled with all the music of the spheres? 'T is pop in yonder bottle; I bid thee break the neck, and drink to Cynthia — Cynthia, Queen of the Kitchen, Cynthia of the Auburn Crown."

His voice ceased as he began assault on the food, evidently hungry enough to forget all else for the time. MacGrath ate also in silence, gazing across at his companion in wonderment which he could not express. The latter glanced up, and caught the boy's eyes.

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"Pardon my lack of conviviality," he explained, "but nature abhors a vacuum, and I am empty as the upper sky; besides, my vagrant thoughts were all with Cynthia. Hast ever had an ideal, lad, for which you sought o'er sea and land? By all the gods, were it not for her nose, tip-tilted like the petals of a flower, and a few base freckles on her damask cheeks, Cynthia would have realized my dream. And she can cook withal; sample the pie, and bear witness to her culinary skill. But I am not worthy, and here and now I cast the image from me. Cynthia, farewell! a long farewell to all thy loveliness!"

He bit into a sandwich, and thus kept busy for a time, but the pause was brief.

"To me, lad, you resemble one who might work, if necessity arose, yet not like one who yearns for such necessity. 'T is well; any fool can labor, but it requires wisdom to live otherwise. To-day we rest, loaf, and invite the soul. We'll seek some sylvan glade, and there reposing on the soft green sward, while below us flows a babbling brook, commune with Nature. Only, I bid thee talk, thou silent sphinx, that you may thus withdraw my mind

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from Cynthia. Come, I can not bear to see you eat so much. Let us gather up the remnants and away."

They found a high bank overlooking the Mississippi, where, lying undisturbed upon the soft grass, they slept for two hours. Aroused by the whistle of a passing steamer they crept higher, within the grateful shade of a small grove, and, looking far out across the wide river, drifted into conversation, Dean leading the lad to tell more fully the details of his life, while saying little regarding his own career. Even in the short period of their acquaintance a spirit of comradeship had awakened between these two, the silent boy appealing strongly to the elder, while back of the latter's reckless manner were evidences of real manhood which MacGrath was quick to recognize. As the man told of his school days — dwelling as seemed to be his nature on the lighter side — the boy lost his genius for silence and questioned eagerly, his eyes bright with awakened interest.

Later they walked the streets together, passing the blocks of stores and climbing the bluff into the residence district, where many magnificent homes

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spoke eloquently of wealth and refinement. Just before dusk Dean paused, leaned over a low stone wall, and drawing the lad's attention to a fair sized house of brick and stone situated well back from the street amid a well kept lawn, said quietly:

"There's no use sleeping outside when there are beds ready and waiting for us."

"What do you mean?"

"I was in here this morning. People all gone away. Front door boarded up. Forgot to fasten the rear window. High wall and trees all around. Decided to take a look inside. Found everything fine as silk, made me sleepy just to look at the beds." He glanced about through the gathering gloom. "Come on, boy; I expect there is not much in the larder, and we better go back after our provisions."

It was about nine o'clock when they returned, the night clear and starlight, but without a moon, and the quiet street seemingly deserted of inhabitants. Other houses along the block exhibited lights, but this which they had chosen remained dark and silent. They crept in through the gate, picked their way cautiously along a narrow path shaded by thick shrubbery, and thus gained the rear,

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where Dean quickly located the unfastened window. An empty barrel standing near enabled him to reach the sill easily, and the sash was lifted without noise. With a low whisper to MacGrath to follow quietly, the man disappeared into the darkness within. The boy did as told, his heart beating wildly at such unaccustomed adventure, yet stirred by the thrill of enjoyment, feeling his way inside until he rested securely on the floor. Dean was waiting within to grasp his arm.

"It's only a step we'll go to-night," he whispered. "To-morrow we'll look the shebang over by daylight, but now the bedroom next door is all we want, and no need of a light."

He went forward, feeling his way toward the door, still grasping the boy by the arm. Then Don heard the turning of the knob, the sound slight yet noticeable in the intense stillness, and the door opened noiselessly. To the astonishment of both a faint gleam of light greeted them. For an instant they thought it a reflection of the street lamps shining through an uncurtained window; but as Dean pushed the door further, their eyes caught a full view of the interior. The shock held them

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speechless, yet indelibly impressed the sight upon their memory. It was a chamber, delightfully furnished, a shaded electric light shedding a soft glow over all. Opposite them, with a large mirror above, stood a dressing table, and sitting before it, with back toward them, dressed in negligee, was a young woman. Don saw the white sheen of neck and shoulder, a long tress of dark brown hair rippling nearly to the floor, and then a reflection of the face in the glass. He stared in mingled fascination and fear at the beauty revealed, from the broad, low forehead, the rounded cheeks, the generous arched lips, the dark, wide-opened eyes. Then he realized that she saw them also, saw them peering at her in the mirror. He watched her hand steal forth and grasp the telephone on the stand, her frightened eyes still upon the reflection in the glass.

What was the matter with Dean? He stood gripping the door, trembling weakly, staring at the woman, helpless to move. Don gripped him, even as her voice at the transmitter reached him.

"Central, quick please; send policemen to 23 Arcade Place."

In a flash Dean stepped back, and closed the door.

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"The window, boy," he whispered hoarsely. "Jump for it, or we'll both be trapped."

Once outside he seemed himself again, grasping the situation, and comprehending the necessity for haste. With a brief word to Don to follow, he scaled the back fence, ran the length of the narrow alley, and stopped an instant in the shadow of a bunch of trees to decide what was best to do. A half-dozen blue-coats appeared at the corner and ran forward, two heading for the alley entrance, the others for the front of the house. The fugitives crouched in the shadows as those bound for the alley passed them.

"Now's our time," whispered Dean. "Straight down the bluff; they'll search the town for us, and we must be off."

Chapter IV

WHAT THE FACE MEANT

THE man led the way on a run, stooping low so as to keep well within the shadows, turning into a side street half way down to the river, and finally plunging into the dark alleys of a lumber yard. Don followed, breathing heavily, thoroughly frightened by the knowledge that he was fleeing from the police. But Dean's nervous body became active, and whatever effect that woman's face had had upon him seemed to have totally disappeared, now that he was away from it and in the open. The darkness of the lumber yard was intense, yet he appeared to possess some instinct which led him unerringly forward, until the two came out safely upon the river bank. How black and still it was! A few lights glimmered above and reflected across the water, and far away, over toward the opposite shore, they heard the steady chugging of a steamer's engine, the boat itself evidently concealed by an

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island. Dean searched the shore with eyes that seemed able to penetrate the gloom.

"We 've got to cut this town, kid," he announced briefly. "Those cops will round up every hobo they can get their eyes on to-morrow, and the charge will be burglary. It's the river for us — see any boat along here?"

There was nothing but a flat scow bobbing up and down against the bank, and the fugitives turned down stream searching the shore carefully. It was still early, and, if they could get away at once, they would have nearly the entire night before the owner would miss a boat and report his loss. No doubt the police were still scouring the bluffs, but the city patrolmen would soon be notified to round up every tramp found on their beats. Moments were precious, and Dean took possession of the first craft they came across. It was a narrow cedar skiff, clearly enough a pleasure craft, drawn back into a little cove, secured by chain and lock to a stout tree. There were no oars, but Don fell over a broad-bladed paddle on the bank, which Dean flung into the bottom. The shore outcropped with rock, yet it required some search in the gloom to discover a

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detached bit suitable for breaking the lock, but once found, a very few blows did the business, and the boat floated free. Without exchanging a word boy and man scrambled in, the latter grasping the paddle and seeking a stern seat. With scarcely a ripple disturbing the black water, the paddle dipping deep and silent, the skiff shot out toward the centre of the wide stream.

MacGrath lay flat in the bow, his face turned shoreward, realizing from Dean's unusual energy the necessity for getting away quickly, unobserved. The latter plied the shortened oar with skill, heading as straight out as the swift current would permit. Behind, and to the right, glittered the city lights, but the river was black and deserted. Within five minutes the night mist had blotted out the shore line from view, leaving the distant lights mere dots of color. Dean swung the boat's head down stream, using the oar to keep well in the sweep of the swift current. Silently, as though no more than driftwood, they swept on amid the rush of waters. Don possessed the vivid imagination of a boy, and this wild adventure filled his brain with dreams, the excitement of escape causing his blood

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to burn, his nerves to tingle. He longed to talk about it, but the strange silence of his companion held his tongue quiet, only to give wider freedom to his thoughts. Only once did Dean break the impressive stillness with a single sharp question.

"Kid, do you think she saw me?"

"Who, the lady?"— in quick surprise.

"Sure; do you suppose she did?"

Don turned the possibility over in his mind, believing the other feared recognition might result in detection, and casting an apprehensive glance back to where the town had long since disappeared. The scene of encounter rose before him in every detail.

"Maybe she did," he said at last, "but I don't believe she saw nothin' except just the shape of us; we was too far back fer the light ter reach."

Dean drew a long breath of relief, and began again with his paddle.

"I guess you 're right," he acknowledged gladly. "I thought it was that way myself, but was afraid just the same." He stopped, his eyes on the water. "If she did see me it is all off."

The boy said nothing, wondering, and the man waited, evidently anticipating a question. When

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none came, he went on as though the confession was a relief, "You see I knew her, kid."

"Knew her?"

"Yes; I'll tell you about it sometime. That was what broke me up so. Lord, I knew she was living in one of these river towns, but never dreamed of such a meeting. Did you see her plainly?"

"Sure, prettiest woman ever I saw," enthusiastically, "and she had nerve too, calling up the police with us lookin' at her. I wished I knew her, for she looked awful good ter me."

Dean was silent, plying his paddle with new energy. At last he said, almost as if between clinched teeth:

"Maybe you will, kid, if you stay with me. She's just as good as she looks, let me tell you. There's all kinds of fools in this world, but I guess Mark Dean has the record."

The slight star gleam reflected from the water gave Don a glimpse of the man's face. It was so white and haggard as to seem unnatural, but he clung to the paddle, and drove the skiff swiftly down with the current.

Neither spoke again, the boy not knowing what to

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say, and the man lost in his own thoughts. There was no sound but the quick dip of the paddle, and the soft wash of water along the boat's side. To their left loomed the black, irregular outline of the Illinois shore, and suddenly, Dean swung the bow of the skiff that way, dipping the oar deeper as he felt the sweep of the current. The head of a small island, brush-covered to the water's edge, appeared below, but the man's swift strokes drove them into still water, and they rounded in against the main shore, the sharp bow running up the mud bank. They were at the mouth of a small stream with a tangled mass of canes on either side. Dean stood up in the tilted stern, his eyes shaded, as he endeavored to see something of the surroundings.

"This ought to do," he said, more cheerfully than he had spoken before. "They will miss the boat in the morning, and naturally hunt for it down stream. We ought to be able to stow it away in those weeds, while there is undergrowth enough along the banks for us to hide in. Think you can carry half of it?"

The two transported the light skiff easily, bearing it along upon their shoulders until Dean discovered a spot where he felt it could be concealed safely.

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Then he passed back over the faint trail they had left, carefully obliterating all evidence of their landing. They had little to eat, only what scraps they chanced to have in their pockets, nor could they discover, wandering about to some distance, any evidence of a human habitation near at hand. No doubt there were farm houses on the higher ground inland, but this was no time in which to go in search, the black night not being at all inviting. The two lay down on a narrow terrace, well above the river, where they could see without being seen. The stars reflected in the water below, and they could hear the soft ripple against the shore.

Neither spoke for some time, the man lying on his back staring up at the sky, the boy drowsy and half asleep, yet still rendered restless by the excitement of the night. Dean turned over and gazed at the other's dim form. His heart demanded a confidant, and somehow he felt drawn toward the boy.

"Asleep, kid?" he asked.

Don lifted himself onto one elbow.

"Just 'bout half," he acknowledged, rubbing his eyes. "Want anything?"

"No; nothing particular — just thought I would

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a tale unfold," Dean returned, assuming his old lightness of manner. "'T is strange, but true, for truth is always strange, stranger than fiction, my son. If you and I are to be pals 't would be well for you to know the manner of man with whom you consort, and, as our friend Shakespeare puts it, there are stranger things, Horatio, 'than are dreamt of in thy philosophy,'— not that I presume you have any, dredging for mussels not inclining you that way, but curiosity is a common trait of frail humanity, and to that I would minister withal."

Don shook his head, such language beyond him. Dean laughed.

"You think I talk like a fool. Yet 't is only a habit I have fallen into to hide my real self, as the cuttle fish blackens the water in attempt at escape. Back of my words I'm serious enough. What I mean is this: you've been wondering why I was so frightened up there on the hill; why the glimpse of that woman took all the courage out of me. I'm going to tell you why, boy — she was my wife."

Don sat up, wide awake, unable to tell whether or not to take his companion seriously.

"Sounds like a pipe dream, but it is n't. I told

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you a part of my life, but not all. The rest I don't talk about — much. She was my wife, though, and is now, I suppose, for I've never heard of her getting a divorce." The man leaned forward, his chin on his hands, all the fun gone out of him. "I reckon you won't understand, being just a boy, but I loved her, and I love her now. I simply did n't know how to treat a woman, high spirited as she is, and we drifted apart almost without knowing it. My being in the Navy, and away from home so much, may have helped some, but I was wild, and did n't do right, and she could n't stand for it. And one day I found her gone — just a letter left telling me the limit had been reached, that she could never live with me again; begging me not to try to find her."

He stopped, his voice trembling, and the boy, beginning to realize partially what all this meant, waited in silence.

"Well, at first I was angry; then I began to regret, and to understand she was right. I knew then how much I loved her, but it was too late. I was proud, headstrong, obstinate, and would not seek her. But I lost my grip on things, resigned

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from the Navy in a huff, and began to drift. Oh, I was a fool, all right, and came just about where I did n't care what became of me. I reckon you must be a sort of good angel; anyhow you came along just right."

"But did n't you know she was thar?"

"Not a glimmer of it. I married her in Washington. Of course I knew she came from one of these river towns. I suppose I've heard the name, but I was n't thinking anything about that, for I never supposed she went back there. Why, when I saw her to-night you could have knocked me down with a feather. I only hope she did n't see me."

"Sure, she did n't," returned Don confidently. "She'd 'a' made more of a fuss. You know what I'd do?"

"No."

"I'd get her back; you bet your life I would."

"That's easy enough to say," rejoined the man bitterly, "but look at me — a tramp actor, out of a job — would n't I look nice going back to her?"

"Well, you don't need ter be that," and the boy urged his point. "Thar's plenty things you could

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do if you tried. I reckon she won't care much whether you 're rich er not, if only you 're squar' an' fightin' fer a place. I 'm just a kid, Mr. Dean, an' I ain't had no chance ter be nothin' else, but it seems ter me the thing fer you ter do is ter brace up."

"You little devil, you talk as if you were a hundred years old — but keep still, what 's that?"

They crept over to the edge of the terrace, looking cautiously up stream. Coming down with the current, and closely skirting the shore, was a good-sized rowboat containing five men, four with oars in their hands, the fifth standing in the stern, steering with a broad-bladed paddle. Dean grasped Don's shoulder, and forced him flat down upon his face.

"No use going any farther, Cap," said a voice. "They 're out of our district, before this, an' will get picked up in some of those towns down stream. I 'm for goin' back, an' telegraphin'."

"We 'll keep on as far as the bend, Joe," returned the man at the steering oar. "They might take a notion to go ashore there. Then we 'll pull back along the other bank."

"It 'll be a blamed hard pull."

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"Can't help it. Those were my orders. If you fellows would work a little, we 'd be back for breakfast."

Another voice or two grumbled, but the black outline of the boat slipped past, disappearing down the channel.

"Don't act as if they wanted to find us very bad," observed Dean, rising up and staring after them. "Well, we 're safe enough here, but it will be risky travelling any farther in the boat. Say, Don, you were lecturing me just now — have n't you any ambitions?"

The boy hugged his knees, gazing out over the river. It came to him, that he never had; at least that his dreams had been very simple and commonplace. His world had been far too narrow to make anything else possible.

"No, not much," he said, at last, shaking his head. "I wished I could run a steamboat, an' once I saw a circus at Golconda, an' come back hopin' I might grow up ter be a clown. I reckon that 's 'bout all."

"There 's no vaulting ambition there to o'er-leap itself," laughed Dean, yet wondering at the boy. "But you shot it at me straight."

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"Well, you 've got education, an' know things."

"You could."

"Me? I'd like ter know how? Only thing I know is musselin'. They said I was n't worth my salt at that."

The man, leaning back against the bank, did not answer, and MacGrath, after waiting a while, turned over on his side, and fell asleep. Dean never moved, but he was wide awake, his eyes on the stars. Something had touched the old springs in the man, and he was thinking, planning, hoping.

Chapter V

FORTUNE SMILES AND FROWNS

DAYLIGHT revealed clearly the difficulties of their position, and drove all other considerations from their minds. How they were to escape and sustain life, became the one most important matter. They woke hungry, the sun glistening on the broad expanse of water, with nothing of life in sight. Climbing to the highest point attainable they gazed about upon a scene of almost utter desolation, discovering that they were marooned upon a bit of higher land, surrounded by swamp, with no sign of habitation anywhere. Not even the smoke of a distant chimney gave hope, and they were, apparently, as isolated as though upon a desert island. Explorations merely served to confirm the evidence of the vision, a few steps in either direction plunging them into impassable thickets, the stagnant water oozing

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to the ankles, the mud clutching at the weighted feet. It was useless to attempt advance landward; the only way of escape was by the river, and that course was fraught with danger. To float down stream in daylight was almost to insure discovery and capture, while to remain in hiding until the coming of another night meant severe suffering from hunger. Dean turned away from it all with a gesture of despair, but the boy, not altogether unaccustomed to such emergencies, suggested a possible solution.

"We could eat mussels," he insisted. "They're not so bad cooked in the shell; I've had ter do it lots of times."

Dean's face brightened perceptibly, but as quickly sobered again.

"First catch your hare," he retorted. "Of course we could eat them if we had them to eat."

"Well, they'll be thar off the mouth of this creek," protested Don, "thousands of 'em, I bet, fer thar ain't been no mussellin' done here. We've got a boat, an' could find a limb somewhar that would make a rake. We ain't got to pick many up ter make a meal from. I got a knife ter open 'em with."

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The mussel, as a delicacy in the line of food supply, did not appeal strongly to Dean, yet he was in no condition to remain critical in taste, and soon yielded to Don's persuasion. The two hauled the boat down into the smaller stream, and began diligent search after some freak-shapen stick with which they could rake the bottom. A root satisfactorily formed was finally discovered, and the two pushed out from the shore, Dean at the paddle, propelling the light craft toward the end of the island. Finding a spot where the improvised rake would reach the bottom, Don fell promptly to work with all the skill of long experience. He was rewarded by very little success, feeling the shells in considerable abundance but finding it difficult to bring them to the surface with his poor instrument, the slippery things sliding out between the rounded prongs. Finally he stripped off his clothes and dropped overboard. Hanging to the boat, and using his toes to grip with, he passed the dripping shells one by one into the boat, until they had a sufficient supply. Then he clambered back aboard, drying himself in the sun, while Dean skulled the skiff ashore.

An eddy from the head of the island had cast

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driftwood in plenty along the shore, and while Don hastily drew on his few clothes, Dean built a fire, and buried a quantity of the shells in the hot embers. For lack of something better to do the boy emptied the boat of those remaining, and, more from a matter of habit than anything else, began prying them open with the big blade of his jackknife. To do this right was something of a trick, and Dean lay back on the grass watching idly, the blue smoke of the fire rising between them.

"Ever see them find anything worth while?" he asked lazily.

"Sure," and the boy lifted his eyes across the fire, in surprise at the question. "Always runnin' 'cross small ones. Shells don't bring much, but they generally find enough pearls durin' a season ter make a livin'. Sometimes a fellar makes a big strike. Ol' Corrigan found one worth eight hundred dollars down on the shoals last month. He's been drunk ever since."

"How do you sell them?"

"Buyers are travellin' back an' forth all the time — mostly Jews — but I guess the fellars that fish 'em out don't get mor 'n half what they're worth."

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I got so I come pretty near knowin' what a pearl ought ter bring, an' Tom allers took me 'long with him when he hunted up a buyer."

Dean stirred up the hot coals, piling them deeper on the shells. He was too hungry to take any great interest except in the prospect for early breakfast. Besides there were only half a dozen unopened mussels left, and in the pile thrown to one side the boy had found nothing of the slightest value.

"What's the use wasting all those?" he asked finally. "They 'd come handy for dinner."

"Be no good out of the water so long, an' then, I reckon one meal o' mussel a day is 'bout all you 'll care ter eat."

He picked up the largest of the remaining shells, pounded it slightly on the edge of a rock, and then gradually worked the point of his knife blade into the slight crevice. It opened hard and he was compelled to drive the blade deeper by striking the knife handle with a flat stone. This ripped the two shells apart, and revealed the contents. The mussel had shrunk to less than ordinary size, leaving in view a milk white pearl, apparently flawless, and of a size

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to cause Don to cry out in sudden surprise. Dean sat up, startled at the sound, staring at the excited boy.

"Pearl, ain't it?" he asked, noting the white gleam even from where he was.

"Should say so; biggest ever I saw; it's a beauty too. Come over here, an' hold this shell steady while I pry her loose. I don't want ter crack this fellar."

Dean did as told, interested now, and alive to the value of their discovery. He possessed no knowledge as to the worth of these river pearls, but the carefulness with which Don went to work to detach this one from the shell aroused his enthusiasm. The boy's face was flushed, his eyes glowing.

"Suppose it's worth much?" Dean questioned.

"It's bigger than the one Corrigan had, an' a clearer pearl — gee! but we've struck it, Mr. Dean! There, I've got it loose; just take a look at that!"

He danced about, holding the treasure tight in his hand, and then shoving it in front of the other, pointing out shape and color, and letting the sun bring out its beauty. His enthusiasm was contagious, and

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the man felt his blood course hotly through his veins, ambition and hope usurping the place of despair and indifference.

"Do you mean, Don, that 's worth eight hundred dollars?" he asked, unable to grasp the fact.

"A thousand, I reckon. I never seen nothin' like it afore, an' I 've been mussellin' ever since I could crawl. Ain't that a lot o' money?" The boy's eyes fell, another thought occurring to him. "I don't know as I 'm so glad' though," he added doubtfully, "fer, I reckon, it 'll bust us up."

"What do you mean?"

"Why, you 'll have so much money you kin go back up thar to that woman, an' we won't be pardners no more."

"Would you care, Don?"

"O' course I would; you 've been awful good ter me."

"But the pearl is n't mine; it 's yours. I have n't had anything to do with finding it."

"Did you think I 'd do that?" asked Don indignantly. "Ain't we pardners? No, siree; it 's half of it yours, an' you kin go back to her if you want to. I reckon I kin take keer of myself."

SMILES AND FROWNS

There were actually tears in the gray eyes, and Dean felt, for the first time, the depth of his own interest in the boy. Short as had been the period of companionship they had been drawn very close together — both hearts lonely, and longing for human friendship. He reached out his hand, and clasped the boy's, thus they held the pearl together.

"Don't you ever think it, Don," he said kindly. "If I wanted to go back to her, she would n't want me to come. That money would n't be a drop in the bucket. We'll stick together yet a while, lad, but maybe there will be enough for us to get a start on. I'm getting sick of this life."

He looked about over the dull, dead scene, his eyes expressing disgust. Then, as his glance rested again on the boy's face, his mood changed back as suddenly to reckless indifference. It was as though he had lifted his mask for an instant, yielding a glimpse of his real nature, only to immediately resume the disguise.

"But why cry over spilt milk?" with a laugh. "One cannot eat his cake and have it. On with the dance, let joy be unconfined. We are rich — comparatively at least — and may now turn to the

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luscious feast which awaits us. Fish out the smoking delicacies from yonder ashes, and let us fill the aching void. Lycurgus may have had greater variety from which to choose, but never had he a fairer appetite. Suffering Moses, but that was hot! Some salt, some salt; my kingdom for some salt."

It was not altogether a pleasant meal, Dean making wry faces, yet struggling manfully to eat enough to stay his hunger, while Don, less fastidious, partook more heartily. Meanwhile, encouraged by their find, they discussed what had best be done, and how they could, with greatest safety, convert the pearl into money. Don knew of a buyer who made headquarters in a town some twenty miles down stream, and as this man represented all their acquaintance in that line, it was decided to try him. There was considerable risk involved in this venture, as it brought the boy back into the immediate neighborhood from which he had run away, besides exposing both to the danger of arrest by the authorities. But they could not remain where they were, and, with money in their possession, escape would be much easier. Altogether the reward seemed worthy of the risk.

SMILES AND FROWNS

"We'll put it to the touch, to win or lose it all," exclaimed Dean. "If Shylock but disgorge properly all may yet be well. But we must delay departure until night-fall as the villains still pursue. That is the most unkindest cut of all — to remain here in idleness, sustained merely by mussels — would that I could find a can in which to transform these delicacies into soup; methinks they would thus abide more pleasantly in memory. Boy, you must possess the digestion of an ostrich, for while I suffer much internally, you smile like one refreshed and satisfied."

He rolled over, his face hidden in his arms.

"Remain near me in my last moments, comrade, and 'take a message and a token to some distant friends of mine, for I was born at Bingen, at Bingen on the Rhine.' If I live I will indite an ode to mussels, but if I die here on these inhospitable shores cover me with the American flag, and tell the world I gave my life for my country — have you got that?"

"Yes, sir," replied Don in bewilderment.

"'T is well; and now farewell, a long farewell to all my greatness."



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He did not move, and Don sat there staring at him across the dying fire, one hand in his pocket grasping the precious pearl. At last, half frightened, he went over, and bent down — Dean was sound asleep. The boy straightened, his eyes on the river ; undisturbed it swept past, a vast stream of silver, with no life visible along either shore.

Chapter VI

THE SALE OF THE PEARL

THE easy buoyancy of Dean's nature immediately reasserted itself when he again awoke, and he saw the bright side of all their hardships. He examined the pearl again, whistling, and when Don had discovered a tin can stored away in the bow-locker of the skiff, he became quite jubilant.

"Luck has changed, boy; no more the slings and arrows of outrageous fortune," he declared dramatically, "but we will take arms against a sea of troubles, and by opposing end them. Ah, there appears before me visions of soup! No longer shall the indigestible mussel agonize my stomach, but in liquid form give nourishment and good cheer. Build high the fire, and I will prepare you a feast worthy of the gods. First will we sup, and then away on the breast of yonder stream to

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test our fortune. What is this pearl buyer's name?"

"Cohen — Isadore Cohen."

"To my ears it hath the sound of Israel, which means we have a task ahead — but leave that to me; 't will not be the first time I have dealt with Shylock. But now the fire, lad; some dry drift-wood — run, hasten, avant."

As darkness began settling about them a steamer passed, chugging its way up stream but clinging to the opposite shore. It was the only river craft which had appeared during the day, and after it disappeared the night revealed gleams of light up and down the stream where the government lamps were burning. There was no use waiting longer, and the two entered the skiff; and paddled it out into the swift current. This had a sweep of fully five miles an hour, which was amply rapid enough to bring them to their destination in time, and so, merely using the paddle to steer with, they permitted the sharp-nosed boat to drift, and rested back at ease, watching the black shores creep past, and the shine of the stars on the water.

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The boy was silent, as was his want, contenting himself with a few questions, or an occasional response; but Dean was mentally active, intermingling nonsense with philosophy, and occasionally singing some light verse in a rich baritone. In a moment of silence, Don, lying on his back and staring up at the sky, asked about the stars, and Dean gave him all his recollections of astronomy, interested himself in the lad's eagerness to understand. From this they drifted to the world about, and the man described many a strange port which he had visited, the boy's eyes opening wide with wonder, as he listened. Nothing occurred to disturb their voyage, and finally the skiff floated around a point, and they came in sight of the lights of a town.

It was nearly midnight, and their plan was to securely hide the boat, and seek the pearl buyer the next morning on foot. With this in view they paddled farther out into the stream, and swept down past the town for a mile or more, before returning shoreward. Here, discovering the entrance to a creek, they pushed the skiff up out of

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sight from the river, and hauled it ashore, hiding it securely in the rushes. A patch of grass higher up afforded a comfortable bed.

The first rays of the sun awoke Don, and his movements soon disturbed his companion. A hundred yards away was a farm house, and, after a hasty wash in the creek, Dean made for the back door, returning well laden with spoils, and the two ate heartily. Then the man slipped the pearl in his pocket, and together they set out on their tramp into town. It was a sleepy river village, consisting of a few weed-grown streets straggling away up the bluff, a dozen stores, and houses of ancient architecture. The inhabitants had hardly aroused yet for the day's work when they arrived, but they found a general store open, and a boy sweeping out, who told them where they could discover Cohen. That individual had not yet been to breakfast, his chin bristled with a two days' beard, but he was ready enough to talk business, Dean marking how his sleepy eyes lighted up as he saw the pearl. He looked up shrewdly into the faces of the two, eager for a bargain.

"Sure id vas a pearl," he said, sucking in his

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breath sharply, "but poor color — vat a pity, mit such a size, to haf such a flatness. Id vill be hard to sell, but I vill take a chance. No one else vould gif so much, but I vas easy." He spread his hands, looking now at Don. "You vas Tom MacGrath's boy — ain'd id?"

Don shook his head.

"Vat — no! vare you get dis den?"

"Twenty miles up the river. We just happened to run onto it."

The Jew's cold blue eyes gleamed.

"Ah, you not mussel fishers, den. You yoost find dis, and tink id great pearl. Vel, you bring it to de right man — Isadore Cohen gif you more dan any one else on de river — vat you dink it vort — hey?"

"A thousand dollars," returned Dean calmly, no trace of excitement in his voice.

The Hebrew stared at him, gasping.

"Mein Gott! a tousan' tollars. Vas you gone crazy? No! no! I gif you von huntert — hey?"

Dean held out his hand.

"Hand it back, Cohen," he said shortly. "We came here to sell, and not to give away."

The Jew's fingers closed over the stone.

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"Vat you dink, dat I vas made of money? Id vas not wort id, but I take some risk, dough maybe I lose. You sell id for two huntert?"

"Nothing doing; you might work the boy here, but not me. I'm not as green as you think."

"You know pearls?"

"Of course I do."

"Den you look here — id's not good color; id's flat. I offer you more ash id's wort now, already."

Dean leaned over and looked at the stone, gleaming in the brown hand.

"Cohen," he said quietly. "You never saw a better pearl in all your life. It's perfect in shape and color. Hand it over. We'll try the other fellow, Don." He picked it up before the buyer could close his fingers, and dropped it back into his pocket, "Good-day."

"But wait — wait. Mein Gott! such a man! Vy you not talk mit me? Vy you go off dis vay? Maybe id vas a petter pearl ash I dink. I look at id again — vat?"

Dean paused carelessly, barely glancing back at him, both hands buried in his pockets.

THE SALE OF THE PEARL

"I did n't come here to talk, Cohen; I came to sell. Either make a decent offer or quit."

"Id vill ruin me, but I split de difference — I gif you five hunttert tollars."

Dean shook his head, motioned to Don, and turned away. The Jew clung to the gate-post, his fingers trembling, his face white. The two were already fifty feet down the street when he called after them.

"Vait! I do petter ash dot. I gif you more; not a tousan'—no! no! but I make id eight hunttert tollars. Maype I vas crazy, but I do dot — hey?"

Dean turned indifferently, and looked back.

"Cash?"

"Ven de pank opens; you take dot eight hunttert?"

Dean glanced at the boy, who was standing first on one foot and then on the other in a fever of excitement, but his own expression never changed except for a slight twinkling of the eye.

"I hardly know, Cohen," doubtfully. "The stone is worth more. Still I don't care to go peddling along the river. It's nine o'clock now; come on down to the bank and put up the cash."

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"But you vill vait! Vy you hurry so?"

"Because I'm liable to jump the bargain unless you snap it up quick. I'm going to the bank, and you can trot along, or not, just as you please."

He started off, whistling, his hands in his pockets, his very shoulders expressive of indifference. Cohen dodged back into the house after a hat, and caught up with the two just as they turned into the main street. He grasped Dean's arm with his thin fingers.

"I take dot pearl," he insisted, "at eight huntertollars — vat?"

"All right; is this the place?"

The two went in together, and Don seated himself on the step in the sunshine. To him the amount was a fortune, and he could scarcely persuade himself that it was all true, his imagination building castles in the air. So immersed was he in dreams that a big hulking fellow who came out of the general store opposite stopped and stared at him without even attracting notice. The man rubbed his eyes, his face flaming, and then satisfied as to the unconscious boy's identity, shuffled across the street and grasped him by the collar.

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"Ye blamed little runaway," he roared angrily. "Whar yer bin? I 'll tan yer jacket fer ye."

Don struggled to get away, but the huge hand tightened its hold, shaking the helpless lad back and forth as a dog might a rat. Dean rushed out of the bank, stuffing a roll of bills into his pocket.

"Here, you big brute," he cried, "drop that!"

The other paused in surprise, his angry eyes on the newcomer, his jaw ugly.

"Aw, go off. I 'll lick the little devil if I want ter, an' I 'll take a punch at yer 'less ye keep away."

"Who 're you?"

"None o' yer blame business who I am, but I 'll tell yer. This yere is my kid; I 'm Tom MacGrath."

Dean's teeth shut like those of a bull-dog, his lips whitening. He knew enough of Don's story to understand, and the face of the big brute holding the boy was sufficient proof of the fellow's character. The ex-sailor became cool and hard as the professional fighting man.

"All right, MacGrath," he said quietly, "I know you now and have rather wanted to meet you; take your hands off that boy."

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"What?"

"Did n't I speak clearly enough? Take your hands off that boy. You 've got a man to fight this time."

MacGrath, surprised beyond expression, loosened his grip, and straightened up, staring at the straight, slender figure of this new antagonist. He grinned savagely, showing his teeth.

"You!" he snarled, his fists clinched. "Why, ye little runt, I'll crush the life out of ye. Did ye think ye could fight?"

"I can try; put up your fists."

His own hands came out of his pockets, and with MacGrath's first lunge forward, his right arm shot out straight from the shoulder. The mussel fisher staggered back, dazed by the quick blow. Don, cowering on the ground where he had been hurled, looked up, scarcely able to tell what happened. The fight was swift, savage, decisive. MacGrath, confident of his great strength, sought to close, but Dean fought differently from the men of the river, and kept him at arm's length, driving his blows against the other's face, trusting to quickness and



The mussel fisher staggered back, dazed by the quick blow



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agility for his own protection. It was science and coolness pitted against blind rage and brute strength, and the first won. But it was not easy, MacGrath struggling like a fiend to break through Dean's guard, and taking punishment greedily. Back and forth across the street they fought, circling about, Dean battering away at the other's head, until at last the right opening came. Then, with all the force of his body behind it, he landed with his left, and MacGrath went down as though stricken by an axe. He staggered to his feet again, blinded and cursing, only to be as instantly knocked flat, without strength to move, cowering helpless, with arms uplifted to protect his head.

Dean looked at him, poised and ready; then, realizing the big bully had been thoroughly whipped, lifted challenging eyes to the circle of faces. He had become a fighting man, eager for combat, disdaining odds.

"Any of the rest of you care to lay hands on the boy?" he asked shortly.

No one answered, but MacGrath managed to lift himself on one elbow.

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"I 'll git yer fer this," he threatened, "if it takes a thousand years."

"All right," returned Dean easily. "I 'll wait. Come on, Don."

Chapter VII

THEY BECOME SHOWMEN

THEY walked away slowly, taking a direction up the bluff, and away from the river. Don kept glancing back apprehensively, but Dean walked on in seeming carelessness, whistling, his bruised hands buried in his pockets. Neither spoke until they had covered several blocks. Then Dean asked:

"Are we out of sight of those fellows? Any of them following?"

"No, sir; they carried him into the drug store."

"Then we'll skip into this next road, and swing around to the river. If they learn from Cohen how much money we've got on us it might bolster up their courage. Some of those fellows never saw eight hundred dollars in their lives."

Once safely beyond observation the two broke into a run, Dean grasping the boy's hand, and plunged forward down the deserted road which ran

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through the bluffs. Coming to the creek, they found the boat undisturbed, and ten minutes later were out on the river, closely skirting the shore. A quarter of a mile below they rounded a point, completely hidden from the town. Then, placing Don at the paddle to keep the bow pointing down stream, Dean emptied his pockets, and began counting the money received for the pearl.

"Eight hundred simoleons," he declared. "'T is the right tally. The row outside made me grab the stuff and run, but the count is correct. By the gods, the long green looks good to these eyes of mine. 'T is a century since I have seen as much, and here we are, our pockets bulging with real money, and no chance to spend a cent. Oh, the irony of fate!" He ran his eyes over the desolate shore, the drear expanse of water. "My heart panteth for the restaurants, and a canvas-back, but 't is all in vain. Here, lad, is the half of it. Guard well the treasure; perchance it would be best to take me as your example for I have fame as a financier. Have you a pocket? Good; stow the chuck therein, and guard it as you would your knightly honor." He looked back up the river, sparkling in the sun. "'T was a

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noble battle, son; one Thomas will likely remember. Alas, poor Yorick; I knew him well, Horatio."

As they drifted with the current they discussed the future, but without arriving at definite results; and Dean bathed his bleeding knuckles and bound them up in a handkerchief. The reaction from the fight left him light-hearted, and the feel of money in his pocket gave him fresh confidence. At noon they went ashore, purchased food at a country store, built a fire under the bank, and enjoyed a feast. Just as it was growing dark they floated into view of blazing lamps, and again landed, pulling their skiff from the water, and hiding it within a patch of brush. A road ran fifty feet away, and, on foot, they followed it to the village. Half-way there they passed a house, and Dean questioned the man lounging on the front step.

"Friend, what name beareth yonder proud metropolis?"

The fellow stared at their dimly outlined figures, scarcely comprehending.

"We don't feed tramps," he returned sourly. "Go on, or I'll set the dog on yer."

"'T is not food we beseech," explained Dean

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easily, "but information. The fair village below will doubtless furnish food and lodging. I merely asked its name."

"Barnes' Landing," still gruffly.

"Ah, indeed, it hath a familiar sound. My son," turning to Don with a flourish of the arm, "yonder hamlet was the scene of one of my histrionic triumphs. 'T was there we gave the 'Octoroon' to twenty paid admissions. I recall it well, and the torrent of applause which did greet my exit. We departed hence upon a freight, and little did I dream these eyes would ever again behold Barnes' Landing. Be still, my throbbing heart, be still! What can agitate me so? Ah, memory returns — 't is the divinity who served me at the lunch counter; the airy, fairy Lillian. We are about to meet again."

The man got up, and opened the door, evidently intending to escape, but Dean called to him.

"A moment, friend; we beseech but one word more. Whence those blazing gasoline torches along the shore, and the hilarious shouts which assail my ears?"

"It's the *Evening Star* tied up thar."

"The what? A steamer?"

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"No, a show boat; they've been yere a couple o' nights; it's no slouch of a show either. I reckon if you-all are show people yer might git a job thar."

"Thanks, most noble comrade. It doth, indeed, interest me greatly. We will see this company of Thespians. Farewell, a long farewell."

They moved on into the village, and ate at the lunch counter, perched on high stools. Lillian was not present — having departed for St. Louis a month before — but they were waited upon by a freckle-faced blonde, with whom Dean quickly established acquaintance, thus discovering that the aggregation below was known as "Haywood's Refined Vaudeville Troupe."

"Ye gods, could it be Billy Haywood, fair maid?" he queried in surprise.

The freckles hid in blushes, she leaned over the counter.

"They hustle their own grub, so I don't know 'bout that. I saw the boss though; he's a tall fellar without much hair. Plays clown in the show."

"'T is Billy; when last we met he was Simon

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Legree, and I George Harris. 'T will please me much to press his honest palm again. Don, you have eaten enough for two boys of your size; never before saw I your equal as a trencherman. We will away to view the chaste beauties of yonder entertainment." He slid from his stool, bowing low, one hand upon his heart. "Adieu, sweet maid; on our return for breakfast may we hope to be served by your fair hands?"

"I 'm here at eight o'clock."

"'T is time in plenty — may I ask the name?"

"Elsa."

"Ah, how fitting; the word soundeth of romance; I knew an Elsa once of whom you remind me greatly — the same soulful eyes, and soft brown hair. Think not I shall forget, but now adieu till morning."

They passed out into the black street, the girl with burning cheeks staring after them. The town was dead and apparently deserted, but the river landing was ablaze with lights, and the two found no difficulty in picking their way down the sharp incline. To Don, the sordid scene spelled enchantment, the glittering lights and gayly decorated boat

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was charming as fairy land. Dean smiled at the look on the boy's face, but it was a smile of sympathy and understanding. Even to him there was attraction here in spite of all he knew of the tinsel, the pretence which served merely to conceal the hardest kind of life. The show boat, moored close to the bank by straining cables, was a large, flat-bottomed barge, slightly rounded at the bows, but square astern, possessing no motive power. It was designed to be drawn from port to port by any steamer which would accept a tow rope. All but a small portion of the forward deck was enclosed, forming the theatre, while above was a row of cabins. The boat had been freshly painted, the conspicuous lettering stretching from stem to stern, and embellished with much scroll work. Lights glared everywhere, and numerous streaming banners told of the wonders aboard. A wide gang-plank — guarded by an individual in frock coat and plug hat, both somewhat damaged by exposure — led from the bank to the forward deck, and the open windows revealed a motley crowd occupying benches within the superstructure. The stage was not visible, but the evening's entertainment was

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already well under way. The talented company evidently "doubled in brass" as various instruments were struggling with a popular melody.

Dean, failing to recognize the outer guardian as a former acquaintance, produced the necessary coin, and the two went aboard, slipping quietly into rear seats, the man more deeply interested in the lad's enjoyment than in the happenings upon the stage. The entertainment was already a third over, yet what remained was not bad—a rather capable Japanese magician, a knock-about team in a comic sketch, a man and woman in a trapeze act, Billy Haywood himself as clown in song and dance, and a contortionist apparently without a bone in his body. The show closed with a series of moving pictures, the man at the gangway proving his versatility by operating the machine. As the crowd filed out, Dean turned to the fellow for information.

"How do you get to the dressing-rooms?"

The man glanced at the questioner, inclined to be sarcastic, but evidently thought better of it.

"What's the matter with yer? If yer want a job maybe I kin help yer."

"Nothing doing, partner," returned the ex-actor

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cheerfully. "Billy and I are old hands; just thought I'd run in and see him a minute."

"Oh, all right — go outside, and turn to the left. It's the last door."

Don's heart beat fast as he clung to Dean's coat along the narrow passage. To him this experience was something wonderful, something to be dreamed over. He tried to speak, but his voice choked, as the man, unconcerned, lifted the latch, and thrust him within. It was a marvellous apartment, the stage still lighted, with a dressing-room back of the wings on either side. Evidently the women used the one at the right, as this one closer at hand was occupied by men busily engaged in washing off their grease paint, and discarding stage attire. The air was foul with smoke, and noisy with voices, one fellow singing, while another was swearing over a rip in his tights. Over in a corner a man was testing a cornet, and from a distance a woman's voice was calling Henry to come over and assist her. It was altogether delightful confusion,—scenery, men, and a huge dog, huddled bewilderingly.

Dean, however, was perfectly at home, and in a

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glance had picked out the man he sought. He had discarded the garments of a clown, and was brushing his thin hair before a cracked mirror. Dean grasped his shoulder.

"Hullo, Billy, old boy," he said cheerily. "Still at the game, I see."

The other peered about at the speaker, his eyes narrowing, evidently nearsighted; then his rather solemn face lit up in recognition.

"May Heaven preserve me, it's Mark Dean!" he cried, extending both hands. "The same old Mark, but playing in hard luck yet, from the look of your clothes. But cheer up, lad, I've got a job for you."

Dean laughed.

"Drop it, Billy," he said. "Mine raiment may not proclaim the fact, yet I come as capitalist, rather than suppliant for favor."

"The saints be praised! Yet how happened such a miracle? Never before have I found you in such condition. Have your talents been recognized at last, or have you married Madame Pauline Devine?"

"Ah, my friend, 't is not so bad as that. Madame

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and I parted company ten days ago. 'T is since then that fair fortune hath smiled. But all this anon. And you are prosperous?"

"Oh, fairly so," his eyes wandering over the motley outfit. "We eat and live, but the money comes slow. 'T is a gay life playing to these river rubes, and keeping artists in humor. Still they're not a bad lot, Mark. If you're flush why not take a hand? I'll sell a half interest in the show."

The other shook his head.

"Not I. Once 't was the dream that stirred my ambition, but no longer. I have reformed. With my partner yonder I seek pastures new."

Haywood bent over, and whispered in the other's ear. Dean glanced about.

"Why, I don't mind if I do," he replied. "Of course I owe you the chance, Billy, for your luck was bad the last time. But what about the lad there?"

"Put him to bed; there's a vacant cabin up above."

One by one the troupe disappeared, and they could be heard walking overhead as they sought their bunks. Dean and Haywood continued to talk,

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sitting opposite one another on trunks, and Don, the glamour largely gone, grew sleepy. Finally the two men got up, and bade him follow. They climbed a ladder to the upper deck, and Haywood unlocked one of the cabin doors.

"Go on in and go to bed, Don," said Dean. "I'll be along later; I want to talk with Billy a while."

The boy shut the door, and felt around in the dark for the berth. It seemed silent and queer, and he was a long time getting asleep, listening to the ripple of the water. But finally he dozed off. It was still dark when Dean came in, and woke him. He would not have known who it was only for the voice.

"Say, Don, I want to borrow a couple of hundred — can I?"

The boy rolled over sleepily, pulled the roll of bills out of his pocket, and was gone again into oblivion before Dean had quitted the cabin. When he again opened his eyes it was broad daylight. The occurrence of the night came back to him as though it was a dream, and he reached over and felt for the money — it was gone. He got up, half frightened, and dressed, stepping out into the sunshine of the

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deck. No one was visible above, but Dean was climbing the ladder, and he came forward jauntily.

"That 's it, lad, look about you," and he waved his hand. "You are monarch of all you survey, your right there is none to dispute."

"What do you mean? Did you take my money?"

"Borrowed it, my son, borrowed it, and, as a result, behold our reward. We are now partners — co-partners — in an amusement enterprise, joint owners of this magnificent floating palace, sole proprietors of this temple of art."

Don stared at him in speechless amazement.

"'T is as I say — we now possess all right and title to the *Evening Star* and Haywood's Refined Vaudeville. There opens before us a career so dazzling as to make mine eyes blink. Hand in hand together will we tread the primrose path, achieve wealth, elevate the stage, and write our names upon the scroll of fame. Wake up, kid, and remember who you are. As for me I must lay my head upon a downy pillow, and give this teeming brain repose. Go you below, and bid the caitiff serve breakfast. No longer shall we bend the suppliant knee, but menials shall wait upon our nod. Let the thought

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sink deep, fair sir, that we are now proprietors, heading our own company, nine humans and a dog. We've bought the outfit. I leave you now in charge until I come again."

He dodged into the cabin, and Don heard the berth creak as he lay down.

Chapter VIII

A NEW ACQUAINTANCE

HIS mind only half grasping the truth, Don remained gazing about him at the broad river, the seemingly deserted barge, and the little town on the bank. Little by little he apprehended the probable fact that Dean, by some manipulation of their pearl money had become possessed of boat and troupe, which he proposed to manage. How this had been accomplished still remained a bit hazy, but to the boy it was a wonderful fact. The circus, the travelling show, and the river boat, had been, during all his life, the only inspiration he had known; through them he had touched the great outside world, and their glamour had yielded him visions beyond the squalor of mussel fishing. Now all this ambition was realized in a night. At a bound he had reached what seemed to him the very top of the ladder — he had become a travelling showman; ah! he actually owned half interest in this boat, in

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Haywood's Refined Vaudeville! He looked down at his bare feet, his hickory shirt, his patched trousers, and tried to believe it all a dream; but no, he was awake, it was really true.

Still dazed with the wonder of it he crawled down the ladder, and found a long table set below, where the audience had been seated the night before. No one was present except the two trapeze performers and the juggler, who were eating silently, merely glancing up at his entrance, but a negro cook stuck his head out of a side door, and disappeared again as though operated by wires. The male gymnast grinned.

"Hullo," he said genially, a bit of meat poised on his fork, "are you the kid with Dean? Sure; sit down and fill up. Here, you Sam, get busy and hustle in some more grub. Move lively, you black nigger, this is one of the new bosses."

"Yes, sah, yes, sah," and Sam popped out again, sweeping a place clear, and dancing about as if on springs. "We has bacon dis mawnin', an' lamb chops. Ah kin sho' recommen' dem chops as mighty fine eatin', sah. Yes, sah, dey am plenty

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'tators an' bread. Ah done hope yo slept well, sah, an' Ah just lub to see de gemmen eat."

It was embarrassing but pleasant, and Don enjoyed to the full his new sense of power, finding his voice, and answering as best he could the inquiries of the two trapeze artists. Between them the sale was explained, and the boy learned that Dean and Haywood had engaged in a long talk over old times lasting till daylight. The Japanese never spoke, and soon departed, and finally the gymnast and his wife also finished and disappeared, leaving Don to complete his meal alone, except for the occasional popping in of Sam with some new offering. Evidently the black was solicitous as to his position, and his assiduous attentions did more than all else to help Don realize his new importance. Filled to the point of danger, feeling that he would never again want to eat, he passed out upon the forward deck, and stood gazing up the straggling street of the town. He wanted clothes, something befitting his new dignity, but there was not a cent left in his pockets, and he hesitated to awaken Dean. He would have to wait until that capitalist appeared, and so, aim-

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lessly, he strolled down the narrow passage over the guards toward the stern of the barge. A little of the deck had been left open here, although covered by a roof, and a bench extended entirely across from side to side. As Don turned the sharp corner of the cabin, he came suddenly upon a young girl, who was sitting on the bench gazing down the river. He stopped, bewildered and embarrassed, unusually conscious of his rough appearance, and she glanced quickly around at him, her big gray eyes opening wide in surprise.

"Boy," she said, her voice soft and low, "could you swim clear over to that other shore?"

Don, startled at the strange question, looked out over the broad river, but the inquiry was a familiar one, and brought him back power of expression.

"I reckon so; I have done it," he boasted proudly.

"Oh, have you?" and she rose to her feet enthusiastically. "I wish I could, but papa won't let me go swimming. I've got a good mind to run away, now, and go with you. You would n't let me drown, would you?"

Don shook his head decisively.

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"You bet I would n't, an' it's easy too. I know girls who can swim fine."

"Do you? Here, in this town?"

"Naw; up the river, whar I come from."

He could see her plainly now, and he had never seen any one like her before. She reminded him of a humming bird with her quick movements — a rounded figure, dressed in something dark, but with flashes of color at throat and waist; a clear skin slightly olive tinted; eyes of dark gray, shadowed by wonderful lashes; hair brown, luxuriant, and hanging in two great braids, ribbon-tied; a small, full-lipped mouth; and a nose tip-tilted, giving to the face an archly mischievous look.

"What's your name?" she asked.

"Don MacGrath — what's yours?"

"Laila Haywood."

"Then — then you belong to the show?"

She laughed, her white teeth showing with the parting of the red lips.

"Of course I do; it's papa's. I sing and dance; have n't you seen me?"

Don shook his head.

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"No. I saw part of it last night, but I reckon you must have got through before we came. It was a bully show."

She clapped her hands, her eyes shining.

"Papa says there ain't anything like it on the river. I saw Watkins' down at Cairo an' it ain't half as good as ours — they don't have no trapeze act at all. What do you do?"

Don hesitated; evidently the girl knew nothing of the events of the night before, and he had no inclination to tell her.

"Me? Oh, I've allers been mussellin'," he said, ashamed of the confession of inferiority. "I never had no chance to do nothin' else."

"You mean raking up shells, and hunting pearls? I've seen 'em out in their little boats. I bet it's lots o' fun."

"Oh, I dunno," yet visibly encouraged by her admiration. "It's awful hot out thar with the sun beatin' down on the water, an' it's a mean job gettin' the mussels out."

"But it's nice to find pearls. Gee! I think they're pretty. I saw one at Golconda that big. Did you ever find any?"

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"Yep; found one yesterday; it was a whopper too."

"Oh, let me see it."

"Can't," regretfully, "sold it to a Jew."

"How much did you get?"

"Eight hundred dollars," proudly.

She looked at him with flushed cheeks, and bright eyes.

"Gee! but you 're rich. That 's an awful lot o' money. Why don't you buy some new clothes?"

Thus suddenly reminded of his deficiencies, Don glanced down at his bare feet and patched trousers, and his cheeks flushed.

"I 'm goin' to to-day," he said, "I did n't git no time yesterday." Then he added shyly, "Your dress is awful nice."

She shook it out coquettishly, tossing her head.

" 'T ain't my best one either. Papa an' I made it. I got one bought all ready made down in St. Louis."

"Ain't you got no mamma?"

She shook her head.

"No; not any more; she died an awful long while ago. It ain't no fun livin' without a mamma."

There was a long pause, the girl gazing out

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across the river, and the boy staring down at his feet. He was afraid she would ask him about his home, and was trying to think what he would tell her, but her mind turned elsewhere.

"I wish you was going along with us," she said at last, turning again to look at him. "I never have nobody to play with, only Rover."

"I am," eagerly, almost ready to blurt out the whole truth. "Mr. Dean an' I are going along; we — we've got jobs with the show. I'm awful glad too, since I met you. I'll teach you to swim, an' dive, an' lots o' things that's fun. I never liked girls much, but I bet I'm goin' to like you."

"Oh, that's nice," jumping up and down, her ribbons fluttering. "Papa was up all night, and he never told me. Won't we have some good times? I like to play in the sand, don't you?"

There was the sound of an ungainly body moving along the guards, and Don felt a cold nose smelling of his bare feet. The girl clapped her hands, and whistled.

"Come here, Rover; Don's all right, an' you've got to like him. No, sir, don't kiss me — lie down! There; that's better," and she patted the shaggy

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head, the dog's eyes on her face. He was a big fellow, and his tail pounded the deck as he looked inquiringly from one to the other.

"He's my dog," she explained gravely, "an' he's only a puppy if he is big. You stroke him — he'll let you. But he can fight too; he bit a tramp once. He goes out in the river an' swims every day, an' then he comes out an' shakes himself. Gee, but he makes the water fly. Did you ever have a dog?"

"Once; he was yellow; 'bout that high; shortest legs you ever saw. We called him Tige, but he got shot, an' I ain't had none since. I like dogs."

"So do I. This one knows you're all right. See, he's goin' to sleep. Ain't it funny how cold his nose is? Just feel of it; he won't bite you."

Helped by the companionship of girl and dog the morning flew away so rapidly that Don scarcely knew where it had gone. It was dinner time before he realized it, and at the table he met Billy Haywood, who told funny stories, and joked, just as if he had n't sold his show. There did n't anything seem to bother him, and he took Laila on his knee, and made the dog do tricks. He had a large nose, deep wrinkles down his cheeks, with eyes always

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smiling just as did the girl's. Don liked him, and the three went out on the bank, and threw sticks in the water for the dog to swim after. Some of the show people sat on deck, and watched them, but no one spoke of what had occurred the night before. The boy almost began to believe it was all a dream.

It was late in the afternoon when Dean appeared, wide awake, and eager for something to eat. He waved his hand to the three on the bank, crawled down the ladder, and disappeared, hunting the cook. Soon after, away below around the bend a trail of black smoke soared into the sky, and half an hour later, a dingy-looking steamer came slowly puffing into sight, breasting the current steadily, her two funnels blackening the sky. She swung in toward shore, but evidently with no intention of landing, whistling to make her presence known. Dean ran out, and began signalling with a cloth in his hand.

Chapter IX

BEGINNING THE NEW LIFE

AT first the boat seemingly paid no attention; then the whistle rang out sharply in response, and she swung slowly in toward shore. Don ran back where he could see clearly, watching the man at the wheel, and the roustabouts on the lower deck. He could make out the name now painted on the pilot house, *Seneca* of St. Paul. A man leaning over the guard shouted hoarsely:

“What ’s wanted?”

“A tow up,” Dean answered, his voice cutting the distance like a knife, and waving his hand. “Lay in above us, and get out your hawsers.”

“Right you are,” and the man ran over to the pilot house, and began shouting to the men below.

Haywood whistled to the dog, and then called after Don.

“Better get aboard, my boy; they ’ll make short work of the job.”

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They went up the inclined plank together, grouping themselves on the deck to watch the steamboat round to, and Dean came down and joined them. He and Billy met with a smile, and the former asked:

"What 's the name of that burg you 've got billed next?"

"Slatersville — forty miles up; don't let 'em rob you, Mark."

"Well, hardly."

The steamer was already nosing along the shore, a man ashore with a line, and a dozen fellows dragging ropes aft. Dean sang out to the captain, who was hanging out over the railing above the wheel.

"Don't hitch on till we talk it over."

"Want a tow, don't yer?"

"Sure; but this is no millionaire's yacht; money is some object to me."

"Oh, that 's it! Whar yer goin'?"

"Slatersville; jump ashore where we can talk."

They met on the bank, out of earshot, and went at it, the profanity of the *Seneca's* captain clearly expressing his private opinion of Dean's proposal. They agreed on a compromise, the two crawling

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back aboard their respective crafts, and the *Seneca's* roustabouts swarming down on the forward deck of the show boat, and making the lines fast. Within twenty minutes they were swinging out into the stream, the shore slipping slowly past, Barnes' Landing fading away below.

Don never forgot that trip, or erased the impressions it left on his mind. Having nothing to do the entire troupe dragged out chairs onto the upper deck, and proceeded to enjoy the journey, gazing out on the passing shores and across the heaving expanse of water, voice after voice drifting into reminiscence. Stories were told; those who "doubled in brass" brought out their instruments and played popular tunes, the music echoing back from the river, and, at Haywood's request, Laila sang several times, her voice sweet, and remarkably strong for one so young. It was the first time the boy had seen the company together, and he listened to them eagerly, already fascinated by the care-free life. They were fairly typical of their class — the two knock-about artists, middle-aged, undersized men, who had been at the business all their lives; the Japanese, constantly working at some trick, and

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never speaking; the contortionist, long, lean, incessantly smoking cigarettes; the trapeze people, the man purple-faced and muscular, a reservoir of stories, and his wife, a slender woman, at least ten years younger, with a pretty face, but sad. The ticket man, who "doubled in brass," and also attended to the advertising, was an old-time showman, wrinkled and habitually half drunk. Everything that was said reminded him of some occurrence of younger days, and Dean drew him out, enjoying his quaint way of relating experiences. Haywood said little, sitting over by the rail, and smoking incessantly.

The red sun sank slowly behind the western bank, bridging the water with bars of reddish gold, and then the gathering dusk blotted out the shore lines. The *Seneca* thrashed ahead, her light engines snorting as she strained at the tow ropes, her opening furnace door throwing a dull gleam into the black sky. Occasionally a voice came back shouting an order, and once the roustabouts sang some negro melody, which echoed above the clank and splash of the wheel. Don lay flat on the deck, listening to all that was said, and watching a little cluster of

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lights, marking the presence of some small town, when Laila came over, and sat beside him, the dog crawling along and crouching at her feet. Neither spoke, but the boy looked into her face, where the stars shed silver light upon it, and began to dream. Then way ahead, on the *Seneca*, a negro voice sang,

“Dem golden slippers dey are laid away;
’Cause I ain’t gwine to wear ’em till my weddin’ day,”

the husky tenor ringing sweetly through the night.

One by one the little company slipped down the ladder to their supper in the cabin below, but the boy and the girl did not move. She thought him asleep, until he half sat up, his cheek in his hand.

“Ain’t it awful quiet?” he asked.

“I should say so; but I like it this way. I bet you don’t know what I was wondering.”

“Of course not — what was it?”

“I was wondering what you ’re going to be when you get to be a man.”

“Oh!” and Don sat straight up. “Why, I reckon I had n’t thought about that. Maybe I’ll be a showman.”

“Pooh! I would n’t,” indignantly, “not unless I

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had to; you 'll get enough of it in a week. I know what I want to be."

"What?" echoed Don, there coming before him the only alternative for a woman he knew. "A school-teacher?"

"I should say not," tossing her head. "I 'm going to be an opera singer. I went to an opera in St. Louis, and it was grand. Papa took me to the man who owned it, and he said I had a fine voice, which ought to be cultivated, and I 'm going to school when papa gets some money; he said I might. Won't that be fine?"

"I don't know," replied the boy thoughtfully. "What 's an opera like anyhow?"

"It 's just singing," clasping her hands. "Oh, it 's beautiful; it looks like fairy land, and they wear all kinds of nice clothes, and act the same as a play, only sing instead of talk. It 's just splendid, and they make lots and lots of money. It was called 'Carmen,' the one I saw, and papa got me the music, and I try some of it every day."

"Can you do it?"

"Not very well — no; but I 'm just a girl yet, an' I never had any real teacher, only Miss Sloan down

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at St. Louis last Winter. She says I have a perfect throat, and that if I keep singing it will develop wonderfully. Can't you sing at all?"

Don shook his head.

"I reckon not; anyhow I never tried."

"That's funny; most everybody I know sings. But then, a boy don't have to; there's an awful lot of things a boy can do to make money."

"I don't know nothin' but mussellin'."

"Huh! What of that? You can learn. I bet it's fun to mussel, but I'd want to do something more than that when I grow up. Don't you, Don?"

It had never been brought directly home to the boy in just this form before, and he had no answer ready. He had heretofore seen so little of life as to remain almost untouched of ambition. Others about him remained utterly content, and he had drifted indifferently. Laila's enthusiasm touched a new chord.

"Blamed if I know," he said, flipping the dog's ears. "I never thought 'bout it before. Once I had a notion I'd like to run a steamboat, an' I allers thought it would be lots o' fun to travel with a show. Was that what you mean?"

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"I should say not," and he could see the flash of her eyes, the sharp toss of her head. "Anybody could do that! I'd want to be something worth while; something big and strong and rich — something like — like my Uncle Dick; oh, he's just splendid!"

Don sat up, forgetting the dog, really interested at last.

"Who's he?"

"Uncle Dick? Why — why he lives in Wisconsin, 'cept when he's at Washington makin' laws. He was my mother's brother; his real name is Richard Wainwright, an' he's a lawyer, and United States Senator. I heard him speak once, an' I could understand everything he said even if I was just a little girl. And they cheered him, and cheered him; my, but it was nice. Would n't you like that?"

"You bet I would," and Don's cheeks were flushed. "I heard a speech like that onct too. It was at Cairo; but shucks, what's the use? I don't know nothin'; I never went to school."

"Can't you read?" she asked horrified.

"Yep; there was a fellow worked for us who

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taught me to read. I reckon he had been a school teacher onct, an' he said I learned easy."

"Well then, all you got to do is just read books, and find out things," she insisted. "That 's what Uncle Dick did."

"Pooh! I 've read lots o' books; I got one here now."

He pulled from the concealment of a trousers' pocket the wreck of a paper-back novel, dirty and soiled by long handling, but with enough of the cover remaining to reveal that it had been originally gorgeous in red and yellow. Laila took it into her fingers with evident reluctance, but there was not sufficient light for her to decipher the title.

"What 's it about?" she asked doubtfully.

"It 's a bully story 'bout Indians, an' how a fellow saved a girl what was goin' to be burnt at the stake; it 's named 'Kit Carson's Bride, or, The Rescued Maiden.' Don't you want to read it? It 's awful good."

The girl laid it down on the deck near the dog's nose, and drew a long breath.

"No; I don't like Indian stories," decisively, "an' that ain't the kind of books to read to make

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you a lawyer. Uncle Dick had 'em all 'round his room in glass cases. There must have been thousands of 'em. They tell you things 'bout everything — people, stars, gov'ment, geography, an' how to get rich. He did n't have no stories at all."

"But I don't like that kind," protested Don. "They ain't no fun readin'. That school teacher what taught me had a book like that; a man named Rus — Ruskin wrote it. Gee! I tried to read it, but it did n't have no sense at all; it was 'bout dust, an' stars, an' flowers — it made me tired, and there was words in it I never heard nobody use before. I had to spell 'em out, an' ask what they meant."

"That's the way to do," she broke in. "That's learning. Uncle Dick had to do that; mamma told me he'd sit up all night studyin' out things all by himself. It's like that in music too. I don't half understand 'Carmen,' but I know lots more 'bout it now than I did at first. I tell you what you do, Don."

"What?"

"You get Mr. Dean to help; he's awfully good

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educated, papa says, an' he 'll know what you ought to read. You ask him — will you?"

Don's lips were rounded into a no, but the little glimpse the stars gave of the girl's face prevented its utterance.

"What do you want me to do that for?"

"Just 'cause I like you," frankly, "an' cause I know you 're smart. Won't you, Don, to please me?"

The boy rolled over on his back, looking up at the stars. It was not his nature to surrender easily.

"Maybe I will," he said finally, "just 'cause you want me to."

Billy Haywood came up the ladder, and across the deck.

"Hullo, kids," he called out cheerily. "If you want any supper you better be hustling down below."

They went down into the cabin, taking the dog with them, and when the meal was finished, Laila disappeared into her stateroom. Don climbed the ladder again, his mind still busy with those new thoughts the girl had put into it. He took out of his pocket "Kit Carson's Bride," and, after one

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glance at the red and yellow cover, flung it out into the river. Then he looked around for Dean, but that individual was sitting over by the opposite rail talking earnestly with Billy Haywood. The boy waited some time, gazing silently out over the water, but the men were still talking, their heads close together, and, finally, he went into his own room, and lay down in the berth. When he awoke it was morning, the *Evening Star* was tied up to the bank, in front of a town, and the *Seneca* had gone on up the river.

Chapter X

THE CAPTURE OF DON

NOTHING occurred of any special interest during the next three weeks, except that business improved somewhat under Dean's more energetic management, and the little company became better acquainted. Their entertainment was lengthened by a twenty-minute farce, in which Don took part, blacked up as a negro, and the other acts were changed and improved. Don's part was a small one, and to increase his usefulness, dressed in a new suit, his feet surprised by a pair of shoes, he was sent forth daily to help "bill" the town. He might have forgotten the ambition aroused by the conversation with Laila had the girl permitted it. But the very energy with which she applied herself to music made him ashamed to fall behind, while the better clothes he now wore likewise helped to inspire him. He talked with Dean, and the latter was quick to grasp the opportunity, encouraging

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the boy, and preparing for him a regular course of study. They found such books as were possible to procure in the river towns, and Don began to develop a thirst for learning which surprised his advisors. He seemed possessed of a mind which absorbed without great effort, and yet retained tenaciously. Dean recognized in him a natural student, and took pride in his development, while Laila's eyes sparkled with delight.

They were at Slatersville for four nights, and were then towed across the river, stopping at three Iowa towns, before again returning to the Illinois shore. By this time Don had become accustomed to the routine, and much of the glamour had departed. Every hour of the day had its work. Immediately after breakfast he passed bills from house to house, returning to the boat generally about ten o'clock, when, Laila being busy with her music, he got out his books and studied until noon. At two o'clock they gave a performance, after which Dean questioned the boy for an hour, and outlined his lessons for the next day. After supper, and before the evening's entertainment, which began at half-past seven was play-time, when Don, Laila,

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and the dog romped along the shore. After the last show was over the whole company was tired enough to go to bed. Don liked that sunset hour with Laila best of all, and it was her influence which kept him to his tasks, for the girl's ambition dominated him, and steadily aroused his own. At first he could not understand the spirit which kept her constantly practising, yet, little by little, the same inspiration laid hold upon him, and he also dreamed of the future, and attacked his books with new zest. The two would talk sometimes by the hour, planning wonderful lives out in the great world, and thus constantly developing higher ideals. Dean felt the change in the boy, and did all he could to encourage it, his own love of the better things unconsciously reviving as he realized the new ambition awakening in Don. Then the *Evening Star* was towed back to the Illinois shore, and tied up before the town where they had sold the pearl to Cohen.

As Tom MacGrath and his outfit, during the season, covered many miles of river, stopping wherever clams were sufficiently plentiful, neither Dean nor the boy expected to again encounter him at this point. If any such expectation had been

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in their minds the ex-actor would have sought the fellow personally, and kept Don safely on board until assured the clammer had ceased his belligerent attitude. That Tom had any other reason for seeking to regain the boy than merely to get the benefit of his labor never once occurred to either, and the probability was that even his last effort had been inspired by liquor, and that, when sober, he could be easily influenced to permit Don to go his own way. But in all this they were greatly mistaken. The boy was of too great value to be thus given up; neither his services, nor any ties of affection, had special weight with Tom MacGrath, but the retention of Don meant the possibility of a large sum of golden dollars coming his way in the immediate future, and he needed the money. Moreover, the knowledge of that valuable pearl which Cohen had bought was another source of annoyance, constantly fanning his anger. The result of all this was that MacGrath had not left the neighborhood, and, having met a crony from below, had learned that Don had become connected with the show boat. Assured that this craft was bound up river he waited patiently its arrival, planning reprisal, and

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stimulating courage by constant drinking. He was in a low groggery facing the levee when the travellers tied up to the bank, watching through the dingy windows, but the vivid recollection of Dean's prowess in battle kept him hidden, cursing to himself as he watched his enemy. Assured by his own eyes that Don was actually on board he began planning for action.

It was too late to bill a show for that night, and the company rested quietly, not even running a plank from deck to shore. The bank filled with curious idlers, but only a few dim lights burned on board, and finally the watchers wandered away, seeking other excitement. Don and Laila sat together on the upper deck, looking out at the moving figures in the moonlight, talking occasionally, until bedtime. The boy did not distinguish the hulking figure of Tom MacGrath among the others, and felt no premonition of the danger threatening.

There was a shower during the night, but by the time breakfast had been despatched, the sun was shining. This was a larger town than many they had visited, and when Don appeared with his bagful of bills for distribution, Laila expressed a desire

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to go with him. Haywood making no objection, the two passed down the gang-plank, and began climbing the bluff. The main street of the town ran along the summit, looking down upon the river, the lines of stores shading away into a country road. Beyond were the residences, mostly situated well back from the tree-lined streets. Don began with the stores, Laila waiting without while he scattered bills inside, or stuck them in the windows. Half an hour later they began on the houses, and the girl asked to help, each taking one side of the street. As they came out of the yards they would wave hands to one another, and soon the competition of bill-scattering became a race, each eager to attain the end of the street first. Once Don had to pick up a club and go to the girl's rescue against a dog. They became so interested in the contest as to think nothing of the two men who slouched along in the tree shadows a block or so behind, waiting for the children to get as far away as possible from the river before venturing on an attack.

Tom MacGrath had been at the groggery on the levee since early morning, drinking enough to make him reckless, and watching the show boat closely

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until the boy and girl were ashore. He had found a companion of his own stamp, and now, on the very outskirts of the village, the two suddenly swept down on Don as he emerged from a shaded yard into the deserted street. Laila even was not in sight, and MacGrath had gripped the boy before he had a chance to spring aside. There was a quick, fierce struggle, the lad backing through the gate, and nearly succeeding in breaking away, but stopped by the interference of the other man. Don, recognizing his captors, fought until MacGrath struck him to the ground, and fell on him.

"You little devil, you!" he roared savagely. "Ye'll get what's comin' to ye fer this. Yere, Jake, run thet rope 'roun' his arms. Naw, not his legs! We'll make him walk; I'm not likely ter lug him ter the boat. Let go, now, or I'll kick ye!"

Don, flung upon his side, as they wound the rope about him caught a glimpse of Laila flying across the street toward them. He struggled to get his mouth free from the hand gripping it so as to warn the girl, but his efforts were vain, and she plunged in the ruck like a whirlwind, her eyes blazing, her hands clutching at MacGrath, the strength yielded

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by anger toppling that worthy head over heels into the dirt.

"You let him alone!" she screamed, "you let him alone!"

With an oath the clammer was on his feet, and, with one fierce sweep of his hand knocked her staggering back. Don wiggled loose from the grip on his throat just long enough to cry:

"Run to the boat, Laila! tell Dean —"

Then the two men jerked him to his feet, and ran him swiftly down a deserted lane. Struggling vainly to break away the boy caught a glimpse of Laila rising to her knees from where she had fallen, and sent one shout back across his shoulder:

"Tell him it's MacGrath!"

The blow of a hairy fist struck him full in the face, and he went limp and unconscious.

Her face bleeding, yet scarcely realizing that she had been hurt, Laila sped down the hill like a wild thing. She knew enough of Don's story to comprehend what had occurred, and had seen enough of Tom MacGrath's brutality to make her fear the worst for the boy. Before she had gasped out

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her story Dean and Haywood were ashore. At the top of the bluff they encountered Cohen.

"Ah, mein friendt," he cried, grasping Dean's arm. "Id did me goot to see you; maype you haf more pearls to sell — vat?"

"Not now, Cohen. Here, let go, man! Have you seen Tom MacGrath?"

"Sure," his thin lips parting in a grin exposing a row of yellow teeth. "Yoost now he vent down the hollow pack of mein house — you vant him?"

"Yes, and quick; where was that, Cohen?"

"Yonder, py der yellow house, to der right."

The two men raced toward the spot indicated, found the mouth of a ravine, and plunged into it. Cohen watched them, his thin lips curled in a sneer.

"Maype dey 'll find him," he muttered to himself, "but I tink not dis time. Now I see myself vat all dis mean. Maype some monies in id," and he walked off, rubbing his hands.

Chapter XI

WHAT DON OVERHEARD

DON knew little of what occurred during the next hour. He was not entirely unconscious, but his brain seemed numbed and half dead. He recognized dimly that his captors dragged him down a rocky path, and dumped him headlong into a boat. The two fellows pushed out hurriedly — down stream, keeping close to the shore, as the boy judged from the shadows, but every time he endeavored to lift his head, Tom MacGrath's boot knocked him back into the bottom, and he felt it safer to lie still. It had all occurred so swiftly, and he had been battered so mercilessly during the struggle, that he could scarcely collect his thoughts, or realize what had happened. From where he lay he could see the face of the second man, and recognized him as one who had occasionally loafed about the MacGrath houseboat — a typical river rough. The fellow grinned back at him, but no one spoke,

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the two men pulling strongly at the oars, evidently eager to put a safe stretch of water between them and the town. It was easy to understand that impulse, for the hulking riverman had tasted Dean's quality already, and had no desire to repeat the dose. But what bothered Don most was the purpose of this abduction; why should MacGrath care about getting him back into his power? Was it hope of money? or revenge? or only from pure meanness? If this brute was his father — as he had every reason to suppose probable — then if he wanted him back why did he not resort to the law, instead of force, to accomplish the result? The boy could have been reclaimed in spite of Dean, under the law, but this present method would mean pursuit and a fight. Yet this was the most natural way for MacGrath, whose savage instincts would keep him from resorting to any legal machinery. It was easier to steal, and to fight it out.

The bow of the boat whirled about into the narrow mouth of a creek, and then bumped into a dirt bank. Jake dragged it well up onto the shore, and then the two men bundled the helpless lad in their arms, carried him up the bank, along a plank,

DON MAC GRATH

and flung him down on a pile of boards. A door creaked, slammed shut, and a key turned snapping in a lock. A little light shown dimly through a small aperture, and Don recognized his surroundings — he was locked in the front room of the Mac-Grath houseboat. It was a square apartment, bare of furniture with the exception of two chairs and a small pine table, the windows boarded up, the floor dusty and grease-stained. In the old days the place had been used to eat and sleep in, the tribe camping indiscriminately upon the floor, but then the windows were uncovered, except for mosquito netting, and the freely circulating air made the interior bearable. Now the atmosphere was foul, and stifling, and the place plainly designed for a prison. His capture must have been no sudden impulse, but planned and prepared for. More than ever puzzled by the situation Don rolled his body over in the semi-darkness, and began struggling desperately to extricate his hands from the rope with which Jake had bound him. The fierce tugging lacerated the boy's wrists, but his hands were small and supple, and he finally succeeded in slipping one free from its bonds. The release of the other followed



As the two men jerked the boy to his feet, he caught a glimpse of Laila rising to her knees from where she had fallen



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The man laughed.

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"At the cave, I reckon, till ther show party git tired out huntin'. Then, maybe, we 'll spring ther trap. Them fellers won't hang 'round long, an' Cohen is in a hurry ter play his trick."

There was a pause, during which Don could smell the fumes of tobacco. No doubt both were smoking. Then the woman asked suspiciously:

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"What's all this new game, enyhow? Yer might jest as well tell me first as last, fer yer never heard me spittin' out nuthin'."

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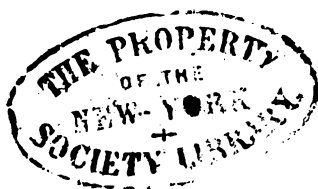
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Chapter XII

THE STRUGGLE IN THE BOAT

THE light streaming in through the slit of the door revealed the woman bearing a plate of food, but she merely slid it forward, her body blocking the passage. Don had no thought of escape, however, for the raw-boned Amazon was even more to be feared than her burly husband. She looked at him now in the dim light unable to keep a taunt from her tongue.

"Yer thought yer was pretty smart runnin' away, did n't yer? Wal, I reckon we 'll teach yer a thing or two yit. What's become o' all thet money yer got from Cohen?"

Don pressed his lips together, and made no reply.

"Yer won't answer, hey! I 'll make yer, 'fore yer git out o' this, let me tell yer. Tom says thet man Dean got it, and put it in the show. We 'll have the law on him, runnin' off with money rightly belongin' to us."

THE STRUGGLE

"It never belonged to you."

"Ye little varmint! What d' ye mean by thet?"

"I 'm not your boy," Don asserted stoutly. "You have n't any right to my money. You wait until Mr. Dean comes, an' you 'll find out."

The woman stared at him.

"Whar 'd yer hear thet? Is thet some o' his lies? I reckon you 'll hev' a time provin' it. Don't yer try ter git smart with me, 'er I 'll break every bone in yer measly little body. Here now, eat what I give yer; it's the last ye 'll git ter-night."

She slammed the door shut, grating the key in the lock, and the boy realized he would better have kept still. She would tell Tom what he had said, and they would be more in a hurry than ever to take him away to some place of safety, out of Dean's reach. His conception of the situation proved true. MacGrath had been inclined to wait as long as possible, hoping one or both of his brothers might return to help. The boy was safe enough locked up where he was, with Dean on a wild goose chase up the river, but Don's words drove him to quicker action. No doubt Dean suspected something, and had told the boy. If so then the law

DON MAC GRATH

might be appealed to, and the sheriff might search the boat. That would never do; just as soon as it was sufficiently dark he must get the boy out of the way, hidden where he never would be found, until they were ready to produce him in exchange for the reward. The two talked it over, the man and the woman, watching the shore furtively all the afternoon, eager for the night to come, and drinking frequently out of a bottle to keep their courage up. Don waited too, hopeful that the night would bring opportunity, lying on the floor, trying to determine what he had best endeavor to do. The darkness and silence of his prison weighed upon him, and he finally fell asleep.

As soon as it was dusk MacGrath drew the small boat forward, put in two pairs of oars, and prepared for a trip. He was half drunk by this time, and grown moodily savage because he was compelled to do the job alone. Mag's tongue stung him like a whip, but she paid no attention to his growling, until he slipped a revolver into his pocket. After that she let him alone, and the two ate supper without exchanging a word. Then she stood at the door, guarding it, while the man went inside, bound the

THE STRUGGLE

boy's feet, and dragged him without, onto the narrow deck. The two dropped him over into the boat, and hustled him onto the after thwart. That was why they had left his hands free, so he could help row, with MacGrath sitting behind watching every movement. The woman climbed back, and cast off, the man sullenly picking up his pair of oars. Don glanced about at him.

"What do you expect me to do?" he asked, half inclined to refuse any effort.

"Ship them oars, an' pull," returned MacGrath gruffly. "We 're goin' up stream, an' yer goin' ter do yer share o' the work — see!" He drew the gun out of his pocket, and flourished it. "An' I ain't takin' no chances with yer either, kid."

The bullying face, reddened by drink, and the ugly gleam of the eyes, expressed more than the threatening words, and, feeling his helplessness, the boy began pulling steadily at the oars, the boat gliding silently out of the creek into the black waters of the river. The channel ran close in shore along here, and they cut across it at right angles, dipping the blades deep to overcome the sweep of the current, until well out in the stream, where the lee of a long

DON MAC GRATH

island gave them slack water, and concealment. Under the dark shade of the bank they crept on, feeling now little resistance, even after passing the head of the island. The boy did not speak, and Tom merely grumbled low, savage threats behind, too drunk to keep still, yet afraid to be noisy. The shore line on their right was dark until they came opposite the town, where yellow lights flared along the bluff, and the windows of the *Evening Star* illumined the river bank. The two in the boat passed far enough out to remain invisible, yet they could see moving figures on board, and hear the orchestra music. The show was advertised and Dean's company were going on with the performance. Of course Don realized it would be so, but his heart came up into his throat, for it seemed almost as if he was already forgotten. Then, as instantly he knew better — Laila and Dean would not forget — and he took a deep breath, his eyes darkening with purpose. MacGrath, pulling steadily, stared at the lights also, unable to restrain his expression of hatred.

"I'll git thet long-legged actor some day," he

THE STRUGGLE

growled. "After I git through this job I'll lay fer him."

Don made no reply, and the lights grew dim; then he asked suddenly, "Where you going to take me?"

Tom laughed unpleasantly.

"Wait, an' find out; it'll be whar them actor people never'll git hold on yer agin."

They headed in toward the shore now, the current having changed its course, and kept along about fifty feet off the bank. It was so dark the shore line could barely be distinguished and there was no sound except the ripple of water as the bow of the boat pressed its way through. Don was becoming tired with the steady strain, but Tom, feeling no weariness of muscle, swore at him the moment he noticed the strokes slowing up, and even shoved the muzzle of his revolver into the boy's back threatening to shoot if he did n't bend down to the work. With feet bound, and unable to see the man from where he sat, there was nothing to do but obey, and every muscle aching, the lad increased his strokes, new anger blinding his eyes. Suddenly the bow

DON MAC GRATH

rasped against some obstacle, and the boat swung around side on to the current. The dead branch of a tree forked up through the water, and it was evident they were foul of a bit of drift. The boat dipped under the sudden pressure, and Tom MacGrath slid to the opposite end of his seat, and unshipping an oar, endeavored to push off. The bow entangled in some manner clung, however, and with an oath the man rose to his knees, thrusting his oar out farther. Silently Don turned, slipping his bound feet across the thwart until he faced forward. The black outline of MacGrath's form was just beyond, his back toward him, as he leaned far out pressing against the extended oar. It was now or never, and without sound or warning, the boy flung himself forward. The man went over with a splash, Don falling flat on his face in the bottom of the boat, which, released by the shock, went bobbing away on the current. It was all the work of an instant, and when the boy lifted his head, he was alone on the black river. He thought he heard some one thrashing the water up stream, but of this he was not sure, dazed yet by the suddenness with which the change had occurred. The oars flapped

THE STRUGGLE

about as the boat drifted, and he made effort to release his ankles from the rope binding them. With no knife this proved a difficult task, but finally he succeeded, stamping his feet to restore circulation, and at last realizing that he was free.

He crawled back to his old seat, gripped the oars, and swung the boat's head down stream. He had no need to row, merely to keep the bow pointed right. He was facing the scene of tragedy now, but could see and hear nothing. The night was black, impenetrable, and the boy was already half frightened by memory of what had occurred. Had he killed the man? Had MacGrath gone down under those dark waters, and was the lifeless body even now floating beside him down the river? Tom could not swim; he remembered that now, and half drunk and weighted by his clothes, he might have sunk like a stone. Still, he went over grasping the heavy oar, and the shore only a few yards away. Somehow all hatred had left the boy, and he no longer remembered the acts of cruelty which had led to this result. He shuddered at the thought that he might be guilty of murder, and, for the moment, hid his face in his hands, overcome by horror. As he

DON MAC GRATH

lifted his head again the boat had drifted around the bend, and his eyes caught the distant gleam of lights. Instantly the desire to be with friends, to tell his story to Dean and Laila, gripped him, and he began to pull frantically at the oars. He was not afraid, yet the black silence of the night filled him with apprehension.

Eager to get away from the river, where he felt the man's lifeless body might be pursuing him, Don swung his boat in toward shore, until the bow grounded on a sand bank. He sprang over into the shallow water, and with a strong push sent the light skiff far out adrift on the current. As his hand released its hold he found his fingers grasping some garment, and as he waded in toward the bank discovered it to be MacGrath's coat. It was like an accusing witness, yet the boy held onto it, scarcely knowing why, and crawled up through the bushes until he came forth on a dark, deserted road. This led straight to the village, and Don pushed steadily forward, his heart beating faster at every shadow or rustle of wind among the leaves. Under the gleam of the first lamp, he examined the coat,

THE STRUGGLE

his eye catching the shine of a paper protruding from a pocket. It was a letter mailed at a town up the river, and addressed to Tom. A moment the boy hesitated, then, impelled by a feeling that the contents must relate to him, perhaps reveal the secret of his parentage, he withdrew the single sheet from the envelope, and read the few lines. It was a mere note unsigned, written in a peculiar hand, probably in an effort to disguise the writing. Some words Don found it hard to decipher. It read:

"Have landed the reward. It is deposited in the bank. Got it fixed so there is no danger. All we've got to do now is to get the boy. That's your part. Have him at the Lone Tree at daylight Tuesday, with the clothes. We'll be counting the yellow boys before night. Don't talk, not even to Mag. Now get busy, and keep out of sight of that actor. I'm afraid of him, for he'd queer the whole game if he got onto it in time."

Don stared at the lines, reading them over again, but they told him no more than he knew before — not even the name of the town where the reward

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was deposited. He had never heard of the Lone Tree. He felt through the coat, finding nothing but some tobacco, and flung the useless garment away into the bushes. Then he thrust the note into his pocket, and trudged on into the town.

Chapter XIII

AGAIN WITH THE SHOW BOAT

THE evening's performance was still going on when Don reached the boat, but the ticket-taker had left his post to assume some minor part on the stage, so the boy slipped aboard unobserved, and found a dark spot on the lower deck where he could await quietly an opportunity to speak with his friends. His mind was still in a whirl of excitement, and he saw very little light to guide him. Who he really was, what name he truly bore, how he was to discover those parents who still sought him, he could not determine. Of course Cohen was the key to it all, yet it would be useless for him to approach Cohen; besides there was still in his mind the haunting fear that he had killed Tom MacGrath, and might at any moment be arrested. This thought caused him to shrink away into his dark corner, and would have driven him to flee had he only known where to go for safety. To him, at

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this moment, Dean seemed the only relief; more and more had he learned to rely on the judgment of his new friend, realizing that, underneath his care-free exterior, was a vigorous mind, and a quick, sure decision. He was exactly the sort to tie to in emergency.

As the show ended, and the crowd disappeared in the darkness homeward bound, Don clambered up the ladder to the upper deck and the moment Dean appeared, dragged him off astern, into the deeper shadows back of the cabins. The man was so astonished at the lad's reappearance words failed him, until they came to a stop at the rail. Then he grasped the boy by the shoulders peering eagerly into his face.

"Well, kid, where did you come from? Billy and I have been hunting you all day."

Don plunged into his story, his voice trembling, his words tumbling over each other, so that Dean had to stop him again and again to get clear understanding. He told of the attack; of where he was taken; of the houseboat hid in the marsh.

"Sure, I know where that was," broke in Dean.

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"We found it just after dark, but there was only a woman there."

"That was Mag MacGrath," explained Don, and went on with his story of what he had overheard, Dean, now deeply interested, breaking into the narrative with continuous questioning. The mystery of Don's birth thus unexpectedly revealed, the undoubted villainy of Cohen and his assistants, the struggle in the boat, and the disappearance of MacGrath in the river, all formed a combination so melodramatic as to appeal strongly to the actor, nor did the details lose any interest from the boy's telling. Deeply in earnest, and yet under the spell of adventure, his simple words made truth seem stranger than fiction. As he ended Dean laughed at his fears, his own thought concentrated upon solving the mystery, and overthrowing the scheme of Cohen.

"Don't worry about that fellow, Don," he said, holding the boy's hand. "Drowning was too good for him, and then the chances are he got ashore. He'll turn up somewhere all right. But anyhow he don't count. The brains of this whole affair

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are Cohen's, and we've got to get him, and get the story. The *Evening Star* is going to be towed up the river early to-morrow, so we'll have to hunt him to-night. Come on; I'll get Billy, and one of the other boys, and we'll start out after Mr. Jew. Oh, wait a minute first — let me see that locket."

Don fished it out of his pocket, and passed it over.

"Maybe this had n't anything to do with me," he explained doubtfully, "but I never saw it before."

Dean held the trinket out where a ray of light revealed its workmanship; it was of chased gold, with some peculiar markings on its back, and a small amethyst set in its centre. The spring was easily found, but inside it contained nothing. Dean turned it over and over in his hand, evidently puzzled, and then his eyes sought those of the boy.

"Don, it's blame funny, but I believe I've seen this locket before. For the life of me I can't tell where, only it looks familiar. What's all this on the back?"

The other shook his head.

"I don't know; it's like letters all jumbled up."

"A monogram probably, but I can't make it out in this light. It's an odd piece of jewelry, and as

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sure as you 're born, I 've either seen it before or else its mate. But there is no use wasting time over that now. Come on, and let 's hunt up Billy, before he gets into bed."

Haywood was smoking a final pipe, but Dean's swift recapitulation of the boy's story served to arouse him instantly.

"We won't need any one else along," he said shortly. "The Jew will talk fast enough if we once get our hands on him. Do you know where to find the fellow?"

Dean nodded, his eyes shining.

"Yes; Don and I routed him out of bed once before. Better slip a gun in your pocket, Billy, for he might not be alone."

The three slipped ashore unobserved, and climbed the bank in the darkness. Only a dim light or two gleamed from the boat's cabins, and the street lamps were all extinguished. Under the faint radiance of the stars they made slow progress, and experienced considerable difficulty in locating the house sought. Apparently no one else was abroad at this late hour, but after several mistakes they found the right place. There was a light still burning within, but a

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strange face fronted them at the door. Yes, he lived there; who did they want to see? Mr. Cohen? Well, Cohen had a room there, but he was away most of the time, buying pearls up and down the river. He had n't been there since morning. No, he did n't know where he had gone, or whether he had taken a valise with him. He came and went as he pleased, and never explained, unless he wanted mail forwarded. The man answered questions slowly, a grumbling note in his voice as though he objected to being disturbed, and the three searchers retreated to the street, baffled but suspicious.

As Dean emerged from the gate his glance caught a dim shadow to the left, and he sprang forward. Before the others realized his purpose he had disappeared in the darkness of a side street. They could only await his reappearance, which was not long delayed. He emerged, mopping his face, and with loosened tongue.

"Too dark for me down there," he explained, throwing one hand back over his shoulder, to indicate the direction. "The fellow simply faded away. It was n't Cohen, though, and I'll be blamed if I don't believe it was MacGrath."

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"MacGrath!" cried Don.

"Sure; don't you ever dream you put that fellow out by knocking him into the river. His kind are not killed as easily as that, and we'll have more trouble with him yet. If this was n't Thomas it was some one with the same kind of a big hulking figure. It's my opinion he was here hunting Cohen. But between us I don't believe Cohen is here. He did his work when he headed us on a false trail yesterday, and now he is busy with his deviltry somewhere else. Where was it MacGrath was to produce you, Don?"

"At the 'Lone Tree.'"

"And you have n't any idea where that is?"

The boy shook his head.

Dean turned toward Haywood.

"Billy, have you ever heard of such a place?"

"There 're plenty o' lone trees along the river, the pilots use to steer by," was the reply, "but I don't seem to recall any about here. I ain't been up as far as this before for two years."

They started back toward the river, Dean doing the talking, as though the excitement of the night had loosened his tongue.

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"Beats any melodrama I ever starred in, Billy — principally because I never starred, you are no doubt tempted to say. All right, old man, then here is where I break into the spot-light. 'All the world's a stage,' and now up goes the curtain. 'T is a great play indeed! Already have we the villain, and his gang of able assistants; the defrauded hero; the leading man, primed for a detective stunt, with minor characters galore. What more is needed but a tearful heroine, and the mother seeking the lost child. Don, it's up to you to produce the maiden. Where is the fair femininity which holds your heart in thrall? What, none? — perish the thought! yet wait! she cometh somewhere; perchance we meet her ere the sun arise, for there must be one; I have trod the boards too long to be thus easily thwarted. She waiteth somewhere, the peerless one."

Haywood laughed, stumbling along in the darkness, and Dean glanced about reproachfully.

"If you possess no soul attuned to art, at least keep still," he continued soberly. "Why laugh, caitiff? Did'st ever see melodrama yet without a maiden, lovely, and in trouble? 'T is beyond dreaming — Hamlet without the melancholy Dane."

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As they came to the top of the bank, from where they could look out across the silently flowing river, there swept up toward them through the black void a gleaming light. Then a long drawn whistle pierced the silence, echoing hoarsely from bank to bank.

"There comes the *Gray Eagle*," said Haywood, "I wonder if Bob is awake."

As though in answer, a yellow flare suddenly appeared at the stern of the show boat, waved back and forth by an unseen hand. In instant response across the water came two short whistles, and then the lights on the approaching steamer swung about as her bow was turned toward shore. Dean stared at the dim, black shape, his jocular mood vanished.

"What did you say was the name of the next town, Billy?" he asked.

"Marshall; quite a city from all I hear; never been there before."

Dean looked at Don questioningly, and suddenly the boy remembered — it was from there they had fled the police; there they had seen the young woman.

Chapter XIV

DEAN AND THE LADY

WHATEVER spirit of tragedy, or love, may have hovered over them, as the dingy show boat slowly voyaged up stream at the end of the *Gray Eagle's* tow-line, it in no way affected the peaceful rest of those on board. To be sure both Dean and Don tossed uneasily in their berths at first, gathering up the threads of the past and endeavoring to peer into the future, yet bodily exhaustion won final victory, and long before the gray dawn illumined the waters, both were soundly sleeping.

The *Gray Eagle* had trouble with her boilers, and it was afternoon before she rounded her tow in against the bank at Marshall, and made fast. Yet in spite of the late hour of arrival, the lower portion of the town was billed, and preparations made for the usual evening performance. Returning as they did the former fugitives had nothing to fear as a result of their previous adventure, which was doubt-

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less long ago forgotten, even by the police. The two tramp burglars would never be associated with these seemingly prosperous show people, and their faces were familiar to no one, unless possibly to the lady on the hill. And as to her the probability of meeting was remote, as she was hardly the sort to be attracted by the show. Yet Don avoided her neighborhood in his bill distribution, and Dean kept to the seclusion of the boat, seldom even appearing upon the open deck. The two understood one another, but no mention of her was exchanged between them.

Yet Dean's unusual gayety seemed forced, and when evening came, and the crowd of curious began to flock on board, he lingered outside the dressing-rooms until the last moment, watching the faces as they passed under the light across the gang-plank. Don, with the quick perception of a boy, noticed this, and realized the mingled dread and hope with which the actor anticipated her possible appearance. The memory of that fair, womanly face, as revealed for an instant in the dim light of the chamber, returned to him anew, and again he heard Dean telling in broken sentences, striving vainly to appear light-

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hearted in the telling, of what she had once been to him. That she was still all that she had ever been was plainly evident, and the boy — loyal and loving — clinched his fingers in sudden determination to bring these two together if it were possible. But how? It must be through the woman, if at all, for Dean felt his degradation far too keenly to ever seek her in his present condition. Suddenly the thought of Laila occurred to Don, and he skipped back into the wings to ask the girl to wait for him on the upper deck after the show.

It was a hard task for the boy and girl, in spite of the enthusiasm with which the latter entered into the romance. The next morning they went forth together passing bills, and Don led the way up the bluff to where the house he remembered so well stood far back from the street, with beds of flowers bordering the front walk. The boy, fearful of recognition, waited without, and Laila, her heart fluttering, yet determined to do her part, went straight up the steps to the front door. Generally, they shoved the bills under the door, or pressed them about the knob, but this time she rang the bell, and then shrank back to the top of the steps, tempted

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to turn and run away. Only the thought of Don watching her every movement from the road held her steadfast. The door opened, and a neatly dressed maid looked curiously at her.

"What is it?"

"I — I was passing bills for our show to-night," Laila said, her lips trembling, "and was afraid they might blow away."

The maid laughed.

"No great loss, if they did," she returned, yet taking the papers, "as you are not likely to get much out of this house, unless I go. Do you belong to the show?"

"Yes; my papa and I. Don't the people who live here ever go to such things?"

"Not to no river vaudeville; I should say not. Sometimes Mrs. Dean goes to the Opera House, but you 'd never get her to no show boat."

"Maybe if I could see her she might come. What we give is n't so bad. Is Dean the name of the people who live here?"

"No — Fosdyke; Mrs. Dean is a daughter. She's a widow, and the others are too old; they never go out nights."

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"Could — could I see her," urged the girl, her eyes shining with eagerness, "just to tell her the show is all right?"

Before the maid could answer, there appeared behind her in the door a fair-haired, dark-eyed woman, with mouth rosy and smiling.

"What is it, Mary? Why, what a pretty child! Did you wish to see me?"

"Yes," stammered Laila, every previous plea forgotten in her excitement. "I — I belong to the show boat down on the river, and — and I wanted to say it is a good show, nothing bad about it. This is one of our bills."

"To the show boat!" and the other stepped outside, gazing kindly into the girl's face. "Why, I never went to one in my life. But you look like a nice girl; what do you do?"

"I sing and dance; my papa is a showman, and I've always travelled with him since mamma died. I — I wish you would come to hear me."

The young woman smiled, yet her hand touched the girl's hair softly, and her eyes were full of a gentle light. "Well, maybe I will, just once," she

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said pleasantly. "If I can find some one to go with me. If not I want you to come up here and sing to me — will you? You have such a sweet speaking voice, that I am sure you must sing well."

"They told me so in St. Louis," promptly, "and Mr. Dean knows about such things, and he says I sing wonderfully well."

"Mr. Dean!" surprise in the tone. "Why, that is my name. Is he a showman?"

"Yes," the girl was startled by the suddenness of the question. "He — he is an actor, and now he manages the show."

"And this Mr. Dean encourages you in singing?"

"Yes; he knows good music, and can sing himself. He has travelled everywhere, and has taken lessons in Europe. I — I hope you will come."

The woman's dark eyes had been scanning the bill with aroused curiosity, and now they turned again to the eager girlish face, softening instantly.

"Then I promise," she said pleasantly. "What is your name?"

"Laila Haywood."

"Such a pretty name! Will you come and see me

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before you leave? Perhaps I can help you also, for I sing a little and have music you might be glad to try."

She held out her hand, and the girl grasped it, her face flushed with pleasure.

"Oh, I thank you so much."

The woman stood watching as she went down the steps, but did not wait long enough to mark the meeting with Don in the road.

"She's just splendid," exclaimed Laila enthusiastically, "and she's coming. I told her there was a Mr. Dean with us, and she just wanted to ask about him, but did n't dare."

"When — to-night?"

"I don't know, only sometime while we're here, and I'm going up to see her," and the girl danced away down the road singing, overjoyed by the success of her mission.

It was a bright, star-lit night, the whole bluff ablaze with electric lights, and the black, moving waters of the river shimmering under their reflection. The crowd gathered along the shore waiting was already evidence that the show was going to open to good business, and Don and Laila, perched

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on the guards since supper time, filled with excitement over their little scheme, watched eagerly the shifting figures. The glare of the great light on the forward deck swept over them, the ticket man took his position, and the first of the crowd began to surge on board, eagerly seeking the best seats. Dean, already dressed for his part, came out from the stage door, and stood silently in the shadow, gazing out over the children's heads. The stream of people flowing in over the connecting plank thickened, and then thinned, and the three watchers had caught sight of no familiar face—it was the usual audience of strangers, nothing more. The eyes of the girl and boy met, and Don shook his head in disappointment; Dean yawned, and turned away, his hand on the door. Just then three figures, two women, with a man between, came quietly down the bank into the full glare of the light. The girl grasped the boy's arm with a little stifled cry, and Dean crouched back into the shadow, his hands clinched together. In spite of the wide-brimmed hat shading her face all three instantly recognized the lady of the hill. The other two were laughing together, evidently over the

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night's adventure, twitting their more silent companion. As they came down to the end of the plank, and the man paused to buy tickets, a few sentences of banter were borne across the narrow stretch of water.

"How much? Twenty-five cents for reserved seats?" he asked, and then glanced aside. "You hear, Lucille, what your mad extravagance has brought me to? Still, 't is the cheapest grand opera I ever attended. Well, here goes, although I can actually smell the crowd from here. Does the courage of either fail?"

"My determination is fixed," replied the one addressed, firmly, her eyes on the boat, and the other lady laughed.

"What woman dare, I dare," she quoted, "and I must hear this prodigy at whatever cost. Lead on, bold knight."

Don glanced about toward Dean, who stood gripping the edge of the door, staring straight at her as she came up the plank onto the forward deck. His face, even under the paint, was white, and his lips were pressed tight. Then the three disappeared within the cabin. Like one awakening from

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a dream Dean straightened up, and his eyes fell on the children.

"Come," he said swiftly. "This will never do; neither of you are dressed, and the curtain goes up in five minutes. Hurry inside,—and Don," as they started, "send Billy out here to me."

A little later, the stage cleared, and those to go on were clustered in the wings, listening to the noise of the waiting crowd in front, when Haywood rushed through.

"Where's Dan?" he asked hurriedly. "Find him, somebody; oh, say, Dan, you'll have to go on to-night. Hustle down and get ready; Mr. Dean is sick."

Chapter XV

THE MIDNIGHT FIRE

THE children saw no one in the audience that night but the sweet-faced woman under the broad-brimmed hat in the fourth row. Through a slit in the curtain they watched her nervously fingering the programme, and from back of the flies observed the expression of her face when Dan came forth impersonating Dean's character part. Yet whether that expression was one of relief or regret neither could determine, but after that she seemingly became more light-hearted, and joined in with the others in fun-making. Don had little to do and attracted but slight attention, but when Laila floated onto the stage, almost fairy-like in her gossamer skirts, she was greeted with rounds of applause, and the woman leaned forward eagerly. Inspired by that one face she saw, the girl even surpassed herself, dancing as though on air, and when her turn for singing came, her voice rang forth

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clear and musical, even hushing that rabble assembly into silent recognition of power. Don read the story of surprise in those three faces in the fourth row, changing into undisguised admiration, and the man led the applause which brought the blushing girl again to the front of the stage. Modestly, simply, yet with a power of expression far beyond her years, Laila sang once more, tingling with triumph, her greatest reward the appreciation she saw within those dark eyes. Again and again the applause swelled forth, yet she would not respond, hiding beside Don back of the curtain, and shaking her head to her father's entreaties. At last Haywood left her, and the noise in front died slowly away. The two children sat with clasped hands, peering out through a slit in the concealing canvas.

"Gee, Laila, but they liked that," said Don, at length.

"Yes," and he could see tears in her eyes, "it was awfully nice, but — but I do wish Mr. Dean had gone on."

"You think she cares?"

"Of course she does. Did n't you see her face when Dan walked out there? She was just hoping

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it might be her Mr. Dean. Oh, Don, I just know they love one another, but they 'll never make up, unless we get them to."

The ticket man poked his head in through the stage door, holding out a bit of folded paper.

"Here's a note fer yer, Laila," and he grinned. "Fellar was a little old fer a stage Johnnie, but maybe I'd better have give it ter yer dad."

The girl opened it, and the two read the lines together: "You are all I hoped, little girl, and I must see you to-morrow. I shall be at home all day.—Lucille Dean." Laila put her head on Don's shoulder, and began to cry.

No one saw Dean that night; Billy said he had gone ashore to consult a doctor, and he was certainly not on board after the audience left, for Don searched the boat, even feeling in his berth, thinking his friend might be lying there in the darkness. Finally, after all the lights were out, and he had waited sleepily until he could keep awake no longer, the boy crawled into his own bunk, only half undressed, and fell instantly asleep.

Dan was the night-watchman, and usually efficient, but his sudden elevation to the stage had led

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to his partaking of an unusual amount of stimulant, and as the immediate effects wore off, he became drowsy. He had made the rounds of the boat twice, flashing his lantern into dark corners, and finding everything safe, when he yielded to temptation, and sat down amid the litter of the forward deck and rested comfortably back against a coil of rope. He had no intention of sleeping, merely meaning to rest a while. The shore was black, shapeless, and silent, the only sound that of the waves softly lapping the bank. Overhead the clouds were skurrying across the sky, blotting out the stars, and the wide river murmured ceaselessly as it journeyed past. Nothing broke the dull monotony of the night, and the tired man nodded, his head settling firmer against the supporting coil. Before he realized the danger he was sound asleep.

Exactly what followed no one ever knew. Dean, idly walking along the road, still fighting his battle, insisted that he heard men running up the bank a moment before the first red glare shot in the sky. He had sprung forward, aroused to action by the noise, but when he reached the shore, the boat was already adrift, her centre a mass of flames. It was

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his cry which awoke the watchman, and the next instant he saw black bodies plunging overboard, endeavoring to reach shore through the flame-lit waters. There were no boats, and nothing he could do but rush along the bank, shouting directions. One by one he grasped the strugglers, hauling them out of the water, recognizing them with a glance, and then hurrying on to the aid of others. The boat, caught in the swirl of the current, was already a blazing furnace, and was being swept further and further out into the stream.

Aroused by Dean's first shout, or else the crackling of the flames, Don rolled to the deck, dazed by the blaze of fire and half suffocated by the smoke which filled the little stateroom. His first thought was to burst open the door, and reach the outside deck. Tripping over the sill he fell forward, striking his head heavily, but was instantly on his feet, so hemmed in by fire as to see no way of escape. The entire centre of the boat was ablaze, the black smoke rolling shoreward, blotting out all view. He saw and heard nothing, except the muffled bark of a dog near at hand. At first, with arms clasped to guard his face, he could not

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locate this sound; then the animal whined, scratching madly at the door of the stateroom fronting him. It was No. 11, Laila's, and this knowledge brought him instantly into action. No door on board was ever locked, and with a shove he burst this open, the firelight revealing the interior. The stateroom was slightly larger than some of the others, with a slatted door opening to the rail. This second door was secured by a clasp, and in front of this, as though overcome by smoke in an endeavor to open it, lay Laila, conscious but faint from weakness. The dog sprang back beside her, growling. What must be done swept through Don's brain in lightning flash. There was no escape by way of the deck, already a mass of seething flame, the heat almost unbearable even where they were. But for the possibility of that outer blind door they were caught like rats in a trap.

"Be still, Rover," he commanded, shoved the inner door shut, and sprang past Laila. The clasp, unused and rusty, refused to yield, but was loosened by a kick; another burst the door apart, and let in a breath of cool air. There was no time for thought or consideration — only for action.

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A glance outside revealed fire both above and below; any moment the entire structure might collapse. With the strength of desperation Don wrenched from its hinges and lifted one of the blinds, thrust it through the opening, and toppled it out into the river. The next instant, clasping the girl to him, he hurled himself forward, endeavoring to strike the water as far as possible from the boat.

They went down deep into the black river — Laila gasping at the sudden plunge, but the boy at home in the grasp of the waters. Even as they came to the surface, struggling for breath, the black figure of the dog, clearly outlined in the fire-glare, circled above and came down with a splash.

“Laila, put your hands on my shoulders,— so. Now, don’t be afraid; I can carry you if you will do just as I say; yes, that’s right; now hold on, and let me do the rest — keep away, Rover; keep away, sir!”

Even as he rose from the dive Don’s searching eye had caught sight of the floating blind, and he struck out for it, all sense of direction being lost in the confusion and swirl of the current. Per-

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fectly at ease in the water, and finding that Laila had not lost her head but was obeying orders, the boy no longer felt the paralysis of fear. He must gain that slatted door before his strength failed; after that it would be merely a question of floating with the current, as the half-door was buoyant enough to sustain both. He struck out toward it, using the sweep of the stream as an aid, the reflection of flames along the surface keeping the black, bobbing object plainly in view. Rover splashed along at their side, swimming gallantly, giving vent to an occasional low whine, as though expressive of fear. Don scarcely had breath for words, but managed to gasp out a sentence or two.

“Just hold yourself by your hands, Laila — don’t open your mouth — there, that’s better — we’re gaining every stroke — five minutes more an’ we’ll be all right — keep away, Rover — that’s a good dog.”

It was a hard struggle, harder than Don had anticipated, for his clothes hampered him, and Laila, in spite of her efforts, was almost a dead weight. Thoroughly exhausted, his chest heaving painfully, the boy finally grasped the wooden

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support, and rested his elbows on it for a moment. Even that slight change sufficed to restore his strength and purpose.

"Here, Laila, get your fingers in between these slats — now I'll swing around to the other side, and keep the thing balanced — get hold anywhere you can, and crawl up on top — oh! yes you can; it will hold you; never mind if it does dip. Not yet, Rover; keep paddling, old boy! There now! get your knee up on top — pull yourself to the centre."

The water oozed through between the slats, and the improvised raft wobbled crazily, but the girl sat safely, grasping the support. Rover was clawing at one side, whining, and it was evident he must be helped up also or else left to drown, as he would never leave them and swim ashore.

"Won't it hold Rover too?" asked the girl tremblingly.

"Sure, only it will sink deeper. Hold on tight now, and I'll help him up. Now, claw, old fellow; that's the way."

Boosted by Don's shoulder the dog managed to clamber up, and then crouched against Laila.

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The raft held them, although the water surged over it, and the boy supported himself almost entirely in the water. Now, for the first time since plunging into the river, he was able to look about and perceive something of their situation. They had drifted beyond the direct glare of the flames, or rather these had died down into a dull red glow, the fire having exhausted the upper works and now eating down into the hull. Evidently a few moments more would bring the end. They were far out in the river, so far that from the water level the boy could not even distinguish the shore, nor tell, in that waste of waters, how fast they were being swept downward. The raft twisted and turned in the swirl, so that only the dull glow of the burning steamer gave him knowledge of where the bank should be. Then suddenly that winked out, and they were left in utter darkness. Laila began to cry, and he reached up and patted her.

"Shucks," he said carelessly, "this ain't nothin'. All we've got to do is just float. There can't nothin' hurt us, an' we'll hit shore after a while. When it gets daylight I'll push you in."

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She hung onto his hand, and became quiet. Then the dog howled, the unexpected sound startling both.

"Blamed if that did n't scare me!" admitted Don. "Here now, you keep still. Say, Laila, ain't that a light way off there?"

She looked as he pointed, and saw the little yellow spark flashing through the black void.

"Yes, but — but it can't be the town."

"No; it 's probably one of the government lights, but it 'll be on shore just the same. You keep your eye on it, tell me the right direction, an' I 'll see if I can't shove this old log over that way. Now sit steady, an' hold onto the dog."

Chapter XVI

DISCOVERY OF THE CAVE

THE unwieldy blind door, burdened as it was and slightly sunk beneath the surface, proved hard to navigate. The swift current bore it irresistibly down stream, and every now and then some fierce eddy would whirl it about, when Don would lose all control. Still he struggled steadily, and continually gained way, although, sunk as he was in the water, he could perceive no signs of progress. The night caused him to believe they were farther from the shore than they really were, while the invincible drift downward soon swept them beyond the light. Yet as the yellow flame flickered out, Laila perceived another far below, and thus, in spite of the constant turning and twisting of the raft, knew in which direction the nearer bank lay. Yet they swept down below the second light before Don succeeded in forcing his burden far enough in so as

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to touch bottom. By this time the boy was nearly exhausted, but he stood waist deep in the water, grasping the raft to keep it from drifting away, while he regained strength and breath for renewed struggle.

The current here was slight, as they fronted a bend in the bank, and the boy could see that they had reached shore at a point where the high bluffs came down nearly to the water's edge. These arose menacingly above them, outlined against the sky. To their view there was no opening in this inhospitable barrier. Both Don and Laila had been sleeping when they passed along here before in tow of the *Gray Eagle*, and they knew nothing of the shore, but the boy felt they must be ten, possibly fifteen, miles below where they had leaped from the burning boat. However, they must get ashore, and bracing himself, Don slowly forced the raft inward until it finally grounded. Rover was out instantly, shaking himself, and Don swung the girl onto the solid earth. They were both chilled through, but in the warmth of the night were not conscious of any suffering. Now that they stood at its foot, the bluff towering above did not seem

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so formidable. Don, knowing they must keep moving or grow chilled in the night air, began to seek blindly about for some way in which they might climb to the summit.

"Wait here, Laila, so I can find you again," he said, half frightened himself at the stillness and desolation, "and keep the dog."

The girl let him go a few steps, but as his form faded away, ran after him.

"Oh, let me go too, Don; I'm afraid to be left here alone."

The boy, almost as nervous himself, grasped her hand, and with Rover whining and growling at their heels, the three stumbled forward through the darkness in an effort at exploration. A few stars, breaking through rifts in the overhanging clouds, yielded a slight radiance, enabling them to trace a passage along the narrow shore line. There were clefts in the bluff, but in none were they enabled to advance more than a few feet. The way to the north was blocked, and in the other direction was only this narrow shelf between river and steep hill. Startled by every shadow, every unusual sound, the two crept slowly forward, almost compelled to

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feel their way in the surrounding darkness. For perhaps a quarter of a mile they crept along thus, discovering no opening to the overhanging bluff, whispering to one another in an effort to keep up courage. Then they came to the black opening of a ravine, some dozen feet across. Low growing bushes, of thick growth and full of briars, almost concealed the entrance, yet there was a narrow passage through these, worn smooth, as though long used as a foot-path. Don felt this out, for his eyes could discern little, but the dog, growling savagely, plunged instantly into the thicket. Hesitating, yet not knowing what else to do, the boy and girl followed, picking their way with difficulty along the path which twisted in and out among the bushes, with continuous upward trend. At times the grade was steep, so they were compelled to crawl; then they came to a level space leading directly back into the face of the bluff, with steep, inaccessible banks on either hand, so high the lighter sky was totally blotted out, and the gloom so thick it seemed like a weight. Why he continued to feel a way onward Don could scarcely tell, yet grasping Laila's hand he pushed

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forward, step by step, until he reached a solid wall completely barring all further progress. They could see nothing, not even one another, but the whining of the dog, apparently at some little distance, caused Don to turn to the left as he began retreat, guiding himself with one hand on the wall.

Suddenly this solid buttress of limestone seemed to disappear, and the boy groped blindly into darkness. Then his fingers again touched the rock edge, and he felt along it, outlining a rather shapeless opening, higher in the centre than he could reach, and about five feet across. He stood staring, but could see nothing; the noise of the dog snuffing about was the only sound, although the quietness of the animal gave the boy confidence that the cave was unoccupied. Just then he heard Laila give a little moan of pain.

"What is it?" he asked anxiously, every nerve tingling with the strain of their adventure. "Are you afraid?"

"Yes, but that ain't it, Don," almost hysterically. "I — I hurt my ankle, and it aches awful. I've just got to sit down."

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"Then we 'll crawl up here in the cave," said the boy boldly, "where it 's dry an' warm."

"A cave? Is there a cave here? Oh, don't; there might be bears in it."

"Oh, pshaw! of course there ain't. Don't you hear Rover in there. If there was anything he 'd find it. I ain't afraid; besides we won't go in only just far enough to get out of the wind. Soon as it 's daylight we can find some way out; maybe there 's a hole clear through. Gee, but it 's dark."

The blackness of the interior was like a wall, but in spite of the fierce throbbing of his heart, Don forced himself to push a way in, clinging to Laila with one hand while feeling about him with the other. The floor was hard and dry, and he felt no inclination to proceed far.

"Here; this is all right," he said at last. "'T won't be long till morning, anyhow. Which foot is it hurts you?"

She guided his fingers to her left, and, the two sitting on the floor, he removed the shoe and began rubbing the ankle.

"Don't hurt to bend it that way, does it? I

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reckon it just got bruised on a rock, an' will get all right. Does that make it feel better?"

"Yes; it does n't hurt much now only when I stand on it. Do you know where we are, Don?"

"'Bout ten or fifteen miles down the river."

"What you 'spose this is? Some wild beast's cave?"

"Naw!" indignantly. "Just dug out by water. I bet we 're the first ones ever saw it. I wonder where that dog's gone."

He whistled twice, the noise echoing strangely along the walls, and then, without a sound, Rover rubbed his cold nose against the girl, making her scream.

"Oh! Why, you mean thing! Lie down! Lie down, sir." The dog crouched beside her, dropping his head between his paws. There was a moment's silence. "He 's going to sleep, Don; he would n't if there was anything here, would he?"

"You bet he would n't, an' he 's been all over the cave too. You lie down here next him, where he 'll keep you warm."

She snuggled down between them, and both were

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still for some time. Don even thought she was asleep until she asked:

"Do you suppose any of them got burned up?"

"I — I guess not," he answered, his voice trembling, for the same thought had been haunting him. "I reckon they got out before we did. It was burnin' fierce when I woke up, an' I did n't see anybody. Can't you go to sleep?"

"I don't know; I 'm goin' to try."

Her head sank back again, resting upon the dog, and Don sat there motionless a long while. Then his leg cramped, and he moved over seeking relief, but the girl never stirred. He bent down until his ears caught her regular breathing. He leaned back against the rock wall and closed his eyes, but his mind was too active for sleep. The warmth of his body had dried his clothes, and there was no chill in the air of the cave, yet he stripped off his jacket and placed it across Laila's shoulders. He could see nothing, and hear nothing except a faint tinkle of water far back in the cave. His thoughts reverted to the burning boat, the horror of it, the fear lest some of those on board had perished. They would suppose both he and

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Laila dead; perhaps would not even search for them along the shore. Then the mystery of this cave took possession of his imagination, and he began to conjure up all manner of strange adventures, peopling the black shadows with the vivid dreams of boyhood. He had heard Tom MacGrath tell of Cave-in-the-Rocks down on the Ohio, and the deeds of terror committed there by Meason and his gang in the early days, and he had read somewhere of the murder of Colonel Davenport, on Rock Island. The thought took possession of him that perhaps this cave might be the rendezvous of some band of river thieves. He trembled all over, staring into the darkness.

At last a tiny wedge of light stole down into the black depths of the ravine, and began to reveal the open mouth of the cave. Slowly the gray daylight made the surroundings visible, penetrating further back, until the boy could perceive something of the immediate interior. With this return of light, much of the grim paralysis of fear departed, and, inspired by curiosity, Don gained his feet and moved back silently, seeking to explore the mystery before the girl and dog awoke. His

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movements were so quiet as not even to disturb Rover, until he stepped over the animal. Then the dog's head was lifted with a low growl. Don motioned him to be quiet, and the intelligent animal instantly dropped his head, with keen eyes watching the boy's every movement.

There was nothing close at hand to denote previous occupancy, but ten feet back from the entrance the cavern veered rather sharply to the left, opening out into a room of considerable size. The light was still dim here, and Don could not see to the top, or discern details of the further extremity, but he pushed forward beyond the rock turn, his heart pounding as he surveyed the interior. There was a rude table, some sleeping bunks filled with straw, a number of boxes evidently utilized as seats, and a fireplace, blackened and ash-strewn, with a rough chimney leading into the darkness above. The boy perceived these things at a single glance, but it was not until he advanced cautiously along the walls that he took in minor details,—a litter of dishes in one corner, a packing case arranged with shelves, containing various articles of food, a shotgun lying on the floor, a can of pow-

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der in a crevice, a number of empty bottles, a half-dozen candles, one partly burned stuck in the neck of a bottle on the table, a scattered pack of playing cards, and a well-worn slicker hanging on a wooden peg. The boy, staring at these things, convinced that he was in the haunt of river pirates and beginning to believe this might be the cave to which Tom MacGrath tried to take him, suddenly came to a second opening in the rocks. It was black and silent, yet far away he could distinguish a faint gleam of light. Even as he gazed at it in wonderment, fearful of advancing into the dark passage, the dim glow was blotted out by some object moving across it. To Don it appeared the vague outline of a man.

Chapter XVII

THE RIVER PIRATES

DON sprang back, certain some one was approaching from the other extremity of the cave, and realizing instantly that he must immediately get out of sight beyond the turn in the passage. Probably he was not yet seen, but the slightest delay would result in discovery. Stopping low, and hugging the wall, he succeeded in leaving the chamber, but even as he slipped about the edge of protecting rock, he heard approaching steps and the gruff voices of men. The dog growled, but the excited boy grasped his nostrils, compelling him to silence, while Laila, awakened by the slight confusion, roused up in fright, her eyes questioning.

“Keep still!” the boy whispered. “There’s somebody comin’ from the other way.”

He had scarcely spoken before they heard them plainly enough, the crunch of heavy feet on the

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rock floor, and the sound of three voices. They were evidently confident of being alone, for they conversed loudly and without restraint. Don's heart beat like a kettle-drum, as his fingers clinched the dog, and his eyes met Laila's.

"It's Tom MacGrath, an' Cohen," he breathed cautiously. "I don't know the other."

"Oh, can't we get away before they come here?"

"I don't believe they're comin' here," answered Don listening. "They're goin' to get breakfast. They're building a fire now. Help keep this blame dog still, will you?"

Laila patted the animal's head, bending down until her face touched his shaggy coat, speaking softly until he lay quiet.

"He won't make any more noise now, unless they come here. Oh, Don, what are we going to do?"

The boy shook his head.

"Honest, I don't know," he admitted. "There ain't much chance of gettin' away if we do try, for the ravine leads right down to the river. You keep the dog still, 'cause I want to hear what they say."

He crept to the end of the rock, but did not

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venture to peer about it. Yet there was no difficulty in understanding what was taking place, and even Laila could distinguish a great deal of what was said. MacGrath and Cohen were the principal speakers, the third man being busy with the preparation of the meal, and only occasionally throwing in a suggestion, usually garnished with profanity. He thus proclaimed himself some river rough whom the others had picked up to assist. Cohen did most of the talking, his high-pitched voice angry and biting: in excitement he had even lost his whine.

"You 're the piggest fool I ever had anyting to do mit, Tom MacGrath," he snarled savagely. "I never supposed there vas such an idiot livin'. What did ye do such a job fer? How did yer ever expec' to help us py purnin' de boat?"

"I wanted ter git even with thet fellar Dean," explained the other, his voice grumbling. "I did n't mean to do nuthin' more."

"Vell, you've played hob all right! Vat's de good o' all dese babers now? An' dese paby clothes, hey? Dat kid's eider purnt up, or else his pody's floatin' down river. Besides, ye ain't hurt Dean

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none to speak of, fer he vas n't even on board. You certainly are de limit — throwin' away twenty thousan' tollars just ter see a ponfire. Mein Gott, id vould do me goot to kill you. Vat is dere ter drink here?"

Tom got up, and came back with a bottle and glasses, but made no attempt to answer. Then Cohen began sputtering again, so angry and excited he could not keep still, and doubtless further inflamed by liquor.

"You pig! you dog! Oh! I vould like to throttle you! Id vas such easy money — like finding id — an' you throw id all away — so. I cannot eat, I feel so mad — yes, de bottle again. See dis letter — here; read it — twenty thousan' tollars; twenty thousan', you fool, just to produce de kid at de Lone Tree. An' you had him, an' lost him twice, an' den drown de little devil mit de cash right in our hands."

"Oh, shut up, Cohen!" and MacGrath's gruff voice was threatening. "I did n't go to do that, an' you know it — so what's the use o' grumbling? Besides, this don't need to queer our

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game, does it? Ain't there plenty o' other kids?"

The Jew set his glass down heavily on the table. Then he gave vent to a mirthless laugh.

"You get some brains if you stay mit me," he admitted in better humor. "Dat vas not so pad; I thought of dat all night; only id vill not pe so easy to find de right vun; everyting must fit — age, looks, and de kid smart enough to stick to his story."

"There's plenty will do that," insisted the other, pleased to have his suggestion accepted so willingly. "What odds if he does squeal after we get the stuff? We ain't obliged to hang about here with all those yellow boys in our pockets. With a week's start no one could find me down the river."

Cohen got up; Don could hear him pacing back and forth across the floor, evidently considering again this proposition.

"Maype it could be," he said at last, slapping his hands together. "Any city gif us such a poy to pe trained — only we must put off dees Mr. Mason; some excuse vy we not deliver at once."



A moment more and the fugitives were outside, in the narrow ravine.



THE RIVER PIRATES

"Who 's Mason?"

"Vy, he is de vun whose poy id vas — can you not read? Here, see vot is signed — Charles Weber Mason. No, you never mind de letterhead; dat 's my peezeess."

"I only wanted to see what line he was in," sullenly. "I reckon my knowin' that would n't hurt, would it?"

"De vay you muss up everyting de less you know de petter — anyhow the fellar runs a pank, an' has got de coin, all right. I meet him dees day; id vas arranged. Ven I get breakfast I vill see him, and make some excuse — yah, de poy vas sick, or maybe run away, an' not to pe found for few days. Den ve go git another poy. Id can pe done; sure I pelieve I know a leedle rascal now vat vill do de peezeess. You haf the paby clothes here — de jewelry?"

"You bet, I've got them, all except the locket. Mag could n't find that."

Cohen spread his hands, apparently satisfied with the outlook.

"Den ve convince Mason all right. Maype id

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vas shoost so vell de kid drown. You vait here, Tom, an' ven I come pack, an' id get night, ve go down de river."

Don, satisfied by now as to those in the cave and their purpose, realized that the time had come when he and Laila must get away, if possible. At any moment some one of the three might wander their way, and a single step around the projecting rock would be sufficient to reveal their presence. To overcome Cohen's present scheme it would be well to keep him in ignorance that the boy was alive — it would leave a trap open for the Jew to walk into. With this thought to inspire him, Don backed silently away toward the girl and dog. Laila was awake, and sitting up, keeping Rover quiet by patting his shaggy head and whispering in his ear. Her eyes alone questioned as the boy drew near.

"It 's Tom MacGrath an' Cohen in there," he explained in a murmur. "They think we're both drowned, an' I'll tell you the rest later. We've got to get away down to the river quick. Can you keep the dog still?"

For answer she grasped the animal's collar,

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crouching forward toward the entrance, and he crept after, almost on his belly, without uttering a growl. Don followed, still hearing the muttering of voices back in the cave. A moment more, and the fugitives were outside in the narrow ravine, with a strip of blue sky above them. Here they arose to their feet, but Laila's hand still grasped the dog firmly.

"Be still, Rover! stop that growling, sir. Don, what do you suppose is the matter? He—he smells something out there."

She pointed ahead, and both stopped, the dog with bristling hair, and lips drawn back snarling. Then two men suddenly appeared at the edge of the bluff, halting in surprise. The next instant the dog had broken loose from Laila, and with a savage growl, leaped upon them.

Chapter XVIII

IN THE HANDS OF THE ENEMY

BEFORE either boy or girl could understand, the dog and men were engaged in a fierce struggle. What instinct caused the animal to feel that these newcomers were enemies, no one could tell, but his first rush was that of mad fury, leaping directly at the throat of the one nearest, barely thrown aside by the man's uplifted arm, but striking him with sufficient force to hurl the fellow helplessly backward. There were curses, blows, the sharp snapping of teeth, a yell of pain, a howl, the crunch of a blow, and men and dog were inextricably mixed in fierce struggle. Don caught glimpses of the fellows' faces — they were Tom MacGrath's brothers; but before either he or Laila could move, it was all over. There was a quick flash of steel, a rapid skurrying, the leap of a body; gleaming teeth snapped; a man cried out as he reeled backward, tearing at the dog's jaws; then came a

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flame, a sharp report; and the animal fell, rolled over the edge of the ridge, as though in convulsions of death agony, and went down with a splash into the water.

Don saw this; saw the two men, wounded and helpless, scarcely yet fully aware of what had happened, one with face in the sand, the other writhing in pain, the smoking gun still in his hand. Perhaps they might escape even yet, before these recovered, before the others came. He caught Laila's arm, dragging her with him, plunging recklessly forward. The man with the gun saw them, somehow connected them in his bewildered brain with the dog, and swearing fiercely, flung himself forward into the narrow path, his weapon raised.

"No, yer don't! You stay right thar!" he roared. "I don't know what 's up, but you-all don't git by till I do. Blast me, if it ain't Don," in sudden surprised recognition. "What did yer sic that dog on us fer?"

Before the boy could answer, or utter a word in explanation, Tom MacGrath and Cohen burst out of the cave into full view of the scene. For an

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instant they stared incredulously; then the full significance flashed over the mind of the Jew — the boy was alive, and in his hands! His sharp cackling laugh was full of maliciousness.

"Py Himmel! id vas fine! See who vas here. You grip him fast, Tom; don't let him go vun minute, he vas slippery as an eel." His eyes wandered to the two men. "Say, vot vas de matter mit you fellars anyhow? Who you bin fighting mit?"

The one with the gun was on his feet by this time, and the other was sitting up, staring about him dazed.

"A dog," was the sullen reply. "You did n't think it was the kid, did you?"

"A dog! Oh, yah; de pig brute dat vas on de show boat. Vot pecame of him?"

"Dead, I reckon; Jim knifed him, an' I took a shot. Last I saw he rolled over that ridge, an' plunked down inter ther water. He was fierce, let me tell yer."

Cohen, with a glance at Tom, whose hand gripped the boy's collar, crawled to the summit of the ridge and looked over, turning his glance first up, then down the stream.

THE ENEMY

"No dog dere," he reported uneasily, as he slid back again, "floated 'round de bend likely. But say, vat did you fellars mean by leavin' yer boat out dere in plain sight? Tryin' ter advertise dis cave ter everypody on de river, hey?"

"We was just huntin' fer Tom; did n't know whether he was yere er not, an' run in ter see. Thar wa'n't nothin' in sight on the river."

"Vell dere 's liable to pe," said Cohen, uneasily. "Dey had some excitement in town last night, an' we're hidin' here until id's got over mit. Here you, Bill, go an' haul dot poat up out of sight into de ravine, an' de rest of you come pack inside; don't take yer grip off dose kids."

The Jew was the last to enter, his little eyes dancing with excitement as he watched the burly Tom drag the helpless boy. Laila made no resistance, frightened by the strange and threatening faces, but the brutality with which he was treated made the boy desperate, and he kicked out savagely, landing twice with his heavy shoes before the two MacGraths got him down, crushed helplessly beneath the weight of their bodies. Cohen pulled them off sputtering fiercely.

DON MAC GRATH

"Here now, you fools! get up, and leave him alone. He's half dead under de weight of you. Loosen up dere, or I'll rap yer knuckles."

Tom let go his grip with evident reluctance.

"He tried to kill me once, Cohen," he growled, "an' he fights like a wildcat — look where he bit me."

"Such a fond an' lovin' barent, doo," returned the other sarcastically. "Here, you," to Don, "sit down, and give us de straight of all dis. How did you two come to pe out dere?"

The boy was bleeding from a cut over his eyes, and breathless still from his struggle. A glance about convinced him of the uselessness of any attempt at escape, and his quick wit told him that Cohen was the leading spirit. Both for Laila's sake and his own, he had best keep on the good side of the Jew.

"We got overboard when the boat burned, and drifted down here on a sort of raft," he explained.

"Did n't any de odders see yer?"

"No."

"Vas you inside dis cave pefore?"

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Don shook his head, realizing the necessity for lying.

"No; it was dark when we come ashore, an' we just crawled into the ravine there out o' the wind, an' went to sleep. What's the matter, anyhow? Are you afraid we 'll tell about this cave?"

"Don't make any deefference vat we're afraid of," retorted Cohen, apparently satisfied with the boy's denial. "We've got our own reasons fer holdin' onter you fer a while yet, an' de quieter yer poth keep de petter off yer 'll be. Bill, you give de rest of dem someding ter eat, while Tom an' I decide vat's pest ter do."

Bill was evidently an expert at camp cooking, a very few moments only being required for the preparation of a meal. Meanwhile the two chiefs, the brutal MacGrath and the oily Cohen, retired to one corner, and began to discuss the situation. Don, holding Laila's hand, and occasionally whispering words of encouragement to the frightened girl, strained his ears to overhear what the men were saying, but only succeeded in catching a word here and there. The swift change in affairs made

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necessary an entire change of plan. Yet apparently everything was working to the advantage of the conspirators. The friends of the castaways were before this convinced they were dead; that they had either perished in the flames destroying the *Evening Star*, or had drowned in the dark waters of the river in vain effort at escape. Beyond doubt Dean and Haywood would search the bank for miles below the scene of disaster, seeking to recover the bodies, and the police would telegraph the towns below. For some days it would not be safe for the gang to venture abroad, or make any effort to produce the boy. The cave was the safest hiding place in all that neighborhood, and could only be discovered by accident. These fellows had used it for years in their trade at thievery, and had no conception that any searching party would stumble upon it now. They would have to make some excuse to Mason for not producing the boy, and keep both children here under guard until the show people gave up the search as useless and departed. That would not be long, probably, for with the boat destroyed it was not likely they would possess enough money to remain idle for any length of time. With

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them out of the way, there would be left no one sufficiently interested to keep up the search. In a week or ten days, at most, the way would be clear for the producing of the boy, and the taking in of the reward. Mason need never suspect that Don was connected with the show until after these preliminaries were all over with, and the gang scattered. The more carefully Cohen reviewed the situation, the better pleased he was; everything seemingly had played into his hands, and all that remained was to lie low and await the proper opportunity. He was glad now the boat had been destroyed, his mean nature rejoicing over the loss which had come to others. Only one fear haunted him, a suspicion that Dean might have recognized Tom MacGrath in the darkness of the night before, and connected him with the destruction of the show boat. It would be safer for Tom to lie low, while he performed the necessary scouting outside. Yet even this would be to his advantage, as he could keep MacGrath ignorant of much that occurred — perhaps he could get hold of the entire reward himself, and leave the others out of the game. The Jew's shrewd little eyes gleamed greedily, as the

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thought came to him, and he began to plan secretly for this end. Tom glowered at him, his dull brain beginning to feel a vague suspicion, yet Cohen had his way, outlining his plan, and forcing the other to surly compliance. The later arrivals had finished eating when the two returned to the main cave.

"All right, poys," said Cohen, intent on getting away. "We've got id figured out, so dere'll pe a goot punch of monies for all of us, eef ve only lie low for a few days. Bill an' Tom vill stay here, und keep guard over de kids; I'll go in town, see Mason, und find out ven de show beople get tired und leave. You other two petter take your boat, und go down de river, till you find some doctor to fix up dose dog bites. Only hold your tongues, und don't get drunk for a day or two. Leave de game to me, and ve'll all of us pe in for a bunch of easy monies."

The three, who only partly comprehended the scheme, looked toward Tom for leadership, but the latter contented himself with growling:

"I reckon thar's nuthin' else to it. I'd rather fight than hide, an' I'll squeeze that Dean yet afore he gits outer this country."

THE ENEMY

"Vell, don't you misuse the poy," broke in Cohen hastily, "for I vant to turn him in to his pa in goot shape. He 'll put up de yellow poys easier. Vell, so long, poys."

He disappeared down the black gallery toward the distant glimmer of light, and Don could see the dim outline of his form as he crept through the opening. The men left behind, huddled together for a few moments, profanely discussing the matter and asking Tom questions. The latter answered gruffly, still angry with and suspicious of Cohen. Finally the two brothers, anxious to have their wounds dressed, disappeared, leaving the guards alone. MacGrath lurched over to where the boy and girl were, and scowled down at them.

"Yer little rat," he said savagely, his big fists closed. "If yer try ter play any tricks on me I 'll break every bone in yer body — yer understand?"

Laila shrank back again on Don's shoulder, her face white, but the boy only looked straight at him, with teeth clinched and eyes blazing.

Chapter XIX

WHAT BECAME OF THE DOG

WHETHER a dog thinks, or is moved to action altogether by instinct, may be a mooted question, but Rover, slashed by a knife, kicked, and pierced by a bullet, certainly realized that he was out of the battle. Half stunned by the shot he had tumbled headlong over the sand ridge and plunged helplessly into the river below. The cool touch of the water, however, revived him instantly, but brought back no desire to renew the contest. The sole wish remaining was to get away. He was bleeding profusely and his head reeled giddily, yet there was strength in his limbs. Some instinct held him to the water, which felt grateful to his wounds, already throbbing, but he waded along the edge of the shore, whining softly from pain, and glancing back in terror. No pursuer appeared, and the dog rounded a sharp bend in the bank, and then for the first time feeling safe, lay down,

THE DOG

permitting the water to ripple over his entire body.

He was not so far away but that he could hear occasionally the sound of a voice, and he growled low and savage in the throat, his eyes always turned backward. The soft touch of the water served to cool the fever of his veins and stanchd the flow of blood, the wounded animal slowly uplifting his head and feeling a renewal of life. Yet he lay there an hour, his whole body submerged and absolutely motionless but for the watchful eyes. By this time the water was no longer tinged with blood, and his limbs felt sufficient strength to uphold the body. He made the effort, and rose, the current lapping his belly. The hawk, perched on the ridge above, flapped its wings and flew away. The dog watched the disappearance of the bird with blood-shot eyes; then drank heavily, and slowly waded ashore, trembling from weakness. The sun shone, and he lay down upon the hot sand. Again and again his eyes turned toward the high ridge, all dog loyalty calling him back to defence of his mistress. Once he staggered to his feet and endeavored to scale the height, but was too weak. He whined sadly as he

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sank down again, realizing his helplessness. He lay there so long this time that the hawk came back, poised in the air, but was held aloft by those watchful blood-shot eyes. Then he got up again, testing each limb, and reeling from weakness. Slowly he moved, half crawling at first, yet steadily regaining strength, along the smooth sand at the edge of the river. Only a slight trickle of blood marked his passage, and the hawk circled above, puzzled and afraid to strike. Finally the animal came to a low place in the bank, and scrambled up, whimpering with pain, and sank down again on the wet leaves. When he got to his feet again, he became conscious of hunger. Just beyond there was a road, and on the other side a farmhouse.

The first thing Rover saw, peering out from a concealing tangle of bushes, was a dog sleeping in the sun just before the front step. Ordinarily he would have welcomed an encounter, but not now. Silently he slunk back, circling the house, crouching and crawling along, until beyond the barn-yard. He was a dog trained to self-denial, but now all the old primitive instincts were reasserting themselves, and he lusted for blood. Out there, at the edge of

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the clearing, a flock of hens were industriously scratching in the black loam, and he crept toward them, every instinct alert. There was a swift spring, the snap of teeth, an agonized squawk, and shrill cries as the frightened chickens skudded away. The aroused house dog came bounding forward, barking fiercely, and Rover, huddled above his silent victim, watched from the shelter of a covert. Growling and suspicious, yet seeing nothing, the other withdrew. Twenty minutes later, revived and strengthened, the wounded animal crawled out to the road, and departed. The sun was hot, but he kept to the shadow, growing stronger as he advanced, until able to essay a slow trot. The blood from his wounds had ceased to drip, fine dust powdering him and matting the hair over slash and puncture. He began to feel like a new dog.

He met a few teams and several travellers on foot, and circled aside into the shelter of underbrush to permit of their passing, sniffing the air but recognizing no familiar scent, and suspicious of the strangers. It was the middle of the afternoon, when, weak and panting from thirst, he limped up

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the long hill into a street of the town. What may have been in his dog mind it is impossible to conjecture, but the savage rush of a hound sent him skurrying in at an open gate, seeking refuge, crouching with a whine of fear, at the feet of a woman standing between her flower beds. With startled eyes she recognized the bedraggled animal, her first step backward halted in sudden pity. Then she fronted the assailant, hoe in hand, until the hound slunk growling away, Rover lying flat at the hem of her skirt, crying softly like a frightened child. The woman touched his head with her fingers, her eyes moist.

"Poor dog," she said gently, and the animal licked her hand with his dry tongue. Then she called to her maid on the porch.

"Is n't this the dog that belonged to the show boat?" she asked quickly. "The one with the little girl the day she was here?"

"I do believe it is, ma'am," returned the other, advancing cautiously. "Only now it looks like a tramp."

"The poor thing has been hurt; see, his hair is all matted with blood. Run and bring some water

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for him to drink. No, wait, we 'll take him to the back steps, and feed him. Come, sir."

In obedience to the lady's gesture, and already assured that he was among friends, Rover crept along at the hem of her skirt, his intelligent eyes watching every movement, although so weak he barely could stand. He eagerly drank the water given him, and made pretence at munching upon the bones offered, meanwhile permitting maid and mistress to wash away the congealed blood. Occasionally he whined at some twinge of pain, but never drew back from the probing fingers.

"Why," exclaimed the lady, horrified, "the poor thing has been cut by a knife, and shot. See! Who could have done that?"

"Sure, I don't know, ma'am, but it seems to me some of them show people ought to know about this. Most likely the dog was with the little girl."

"Yes, he would be; the paper said they probably perished together. Perhaps she escaped also, and the dog is trying to tell about it. See how intelligent his eyes are. Some of those show people might understand what it all means. Do you know where they are?"

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The maid shook her head.

"No, ma'am, but maybe Mr. Mason would know."

"Of course he would. How stupid of me! Run in and telephone him; ask him to come up at once."

She waited, petting the dog, which began to exhibit a desire to get away. She restrained him with no little difficulty, the single idea in the animal's mind being to seek those to whom he belonged. He was grateful for the kindness shown him, his rough tongue caressing the lady's hand, his eyes full of devotion, but the loyalty of the heart made him eager to break away. Yet she kept him quiet until the man drove up to the gate, and came in hurriedly, startled at the maid's message.

"What is it, Lucille?" he questioned, gazing in astonishment at her holding the dog. "Why were you in such a hurry for me to come?"

"It's the dog, Charles; he came in here wounded and bleeding, and he belongs to those show people — the little girl's dog. He was in the same state-room with her, the paper said, when the boat burned. Yet here he is alive — only look! he has been shot and cut with a knife."

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He bent down to examine the wounds, the dog growling slightly, yet held quiet by the woman's firm hand.

"By Jove, that's strange!" the same thought springing into his mind. "Those were never caused by fire or water. He's had a desperate fight, and with men, since getting ashore probably, for he could never have swam far with those wounds. How did it happen, I wonder, and what is it you want me to do?"

"Take him to the show people; perhaps they may guess how it occurred. Do you know where they are?"

"Yes, at the Riverside Hotel, facing the levee; I talked with the little girl's father an hour ago. He is half crazed, insisting the boat was set on fire; that one of the showmen saw the fellows running away."

"Perhaps it is true, and the dog got ashore and trailed them. Did you say one of the men saw them?"

"Yes, Dean. It seems he and the boy owned the show."

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"Dean! Oh, I remember, a short red-faced man, who took part in the sketch."

"No, that was the ticket taker; he assumed Dean's part last night, because the latter was sick. That was why he happened to be awake, and caught sight of those fellows. Haywood — he is the little girl's father, you know — told me all about it."

"Did — did you see this man Dean?"

Mr. Mason shook his head.

"He was out with a party searching the shore for bodies. But all this talk won't help clear the mystery. Let me have a rope, and I'll take the dog down."

She brought him a piece of rope, and he began fastening it to the dog's collar. Suddenly he glanced up into her face, startled by a new thought.

"Why are you so keen about this Dean?" he questioned. "Surely you cannot suppose this wandering showman to be Mark?"

Her eyes fell, her hands clasped together.

"No, scarcely that; but he was so good an amateur I always believed he would go on the stage — indeed, I heard he had — Carrie Peyton wrote me so; that he was touring somewhere in the West."

THE DOG

Mason gazed at her flushed cheeks in wonderment. He had supposed all this over with long since, and Mark Dean a mere unpleasant memory.

"I never knew Dean," he said, uneasily, "but, even if he did turn to the theatre for a livelihood, I should hardly expect to find him on a Mississippi show boat. His ambition would surely be higher than that."

"The best of men meet adversity," she flared back, hurt by his words, "and surely there is no disgrace in owning a river show. You said yourself it was an excellent performance."

"It was; but merely because there is a man named Dean connected with the troupe is no reason for you to assume he is your husband. Besides, what do you care?"

The direct question silenced her for a moment, her lips trembling.

"I — I thought I did n't," she confessed at last, "but — but I do. I had almost forgotten, almost blotted his memory from my heart, and then I saw him again — here, and it all came back."

"Saw him again! You mean Mark Dean has actually been here, has seen you?"

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"Yes; I cannot explain; I will not be questioned, but I saw his face as plainly as I see yours now. It was only for an instant, yet it brought it all back, and I've been hungry for him ever since. Oh, Charles, you have dragged this confession out of me, but I'm not ashamed. Tell Edith if you wish; I do not care. I love Mark Dean! I know I love him. I dragged you to the show boat because that name was on the play-bill, and when that red-faced mummer came on my heart was like lead."

She lifted her face from her hands, her eyes swimming in tears.

"And you say he was not Dean at all; that Dean was suddenly taken sick; that he was walking the bank long after midnight. Oh, I wonder if it could be he had seen me, and for that reason refused to appear? It would be like him, for he does not understand. He thinks I would despise him to find him at such work; that I left him because — because I wanted to."

Mason, suddenly awakening to the meaning of it all, and full of sympathy, grasped her hands, the dog tugging at the rope.

"Lucille, I never supposed you cared any longer,"

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he said earnestly. "Even Edith has never suspected you still love him after all that happened. I cannot believe this man to be Mark Dean, but I will find out. I 'll take the dog down there now."

He turned away, coaxing Rover to follow, and she watched them go out through the gate, hope shining through the mist of tears.

Chapter XX

WHAT DEAN OVERHEARD

UTTERLY exhausted by a sleepless night and fifteen hours of unrelenting search along the shore, Dean had retraced his steps to the hotel, and without undressing, flung himself across the bed of the room assigned him. Agonized by the terrible catastrophe, realizing more clearly than ever before the depth of his affection for Don, and convinced in his own mind that the burning of the boat was no accident, it seemed at first as though sleep was impossible. His veins throbbed, and his brain sought continuously to piece this and that together into some consistent theory. Who could have been guilty of so devilish an act? What motive could have inspired it? Was it possible the boy and girl could have escaped from out that furnace? He shut his eyes, as though thus seeking to escape the memory, with hands pressed against his hot head. He could not think, dare not hope;

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even his sense of suffering seemed dulled by intense fatigue. Without realizing the possibility he fell asleep, his body twitching from nervousness.

Suddenly, an hour later, a noise awoke him to semi-consciousness. At first he hardly comprehended the nature of the uproar just outside the window — then he distinguished voices, and the savage fighting bark of a dog. It was this latter sound which brought him to his feet, grasping the post of the bed, listening. Surely he could not mistake that animal voice — no, nor the human one either — Rover and Cohen! Every atom in him alert, he crossed to the window, and looked out. His room was at the southern end of the building where the road came down the face of the bluff. Ten feet away were three men, and the dog. The latter was held, snarling and struggling at the end of a rope, by a man whose face he did not remember, assisted by the landlord, while Cohen, his pants torn, was crouching back against the wall, evidently too frightened to run, his lips chattering as he begged the others not to let go. Tempted to cry out, to ask where the dog came from, some instinct held Dean quiet and in hiding,

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a new hope, a fresh determination, taking possession of him. If the dog lived, then why not the others? And Cohen! what did Cohen know? Why had the dog attacked him? The sharp, querulous voice of the Jew sounded clearly.

"Hold him, Meester Mason, tight. Mein Gott! vat if de rope break; he vould tear me up. Vat for dat dog jump at me like dat? Vas dat your dog — hey?"

"No, he belonged to the show people," and the other drew in the slack of the rope, until he had the growling animal securely by the collar. "He seemed quiet enough until he saw you. Here, Barstow, help me haul him around to the back yard, and tie him to something solid. You wanted to see me, Cohen?"

"I did, Meester Mason, but I can't talk mit dat dog snappin' at me."

"We 'll fix him; I 'll be back in a minute — come on, sir!"

Howling and snapping, yet perfectly helpless in the hands of his captors, Rover was dragged out of sight, and Cohen, eagerness taking the place of fear, began examining his torn garments and swearing

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fitfully. Not recognizing the dog as the one the MacGrath brothers had supposedly killed, he could not account for the animal's animosity toward him, thinking of it only as a vicious brute. He was still rubbing his limb, where the skin had been broken by sharp teeth, when Mason came back. Suspicious, and hopeful of thus overhearing some incautious word, Dean crouched silently within the window.

"Nipped you a little I see, Cohen," said Mason quietly. "He came along so quietly I was n't looking for trouble, but soon as he saw you he made a spring. Did the dog know you?"

Cohen shook his head. "No, I never saw de brute." Then he looked at the other with a sly smile. "I vas just going to de pank to see you."

"It was about time," coldly. "I waited at the Lone Tree an hour this morning. The fact of the matter is, Cohen, I've about decided you are a liar."

"No, no, Meester Mason," spreading his hands, and speaking rapidly, "I do de pest I can; it vas not my fault de delay; it vas dose who hold de poy, und prevent my getting him. But I prove you; I show you dat now, right away. You come mit

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me to de pank, to de pack room vere no .vun see, und I show you de paby clothes. I haf dem, und ven you see dem you vill not say I lie — dat I not haf de right poy.”

Mason glanced about, only half convinced in spite of the Jew’s earnestness.

“Show them here,” he said shortly. “There’s nothing to be afraid of.”

“I vould rather go to de pank,” protested the other uneasily.

“Nonsense; if you play square with me there will be no harm come to you. Why look here, Cohen, I understand how you come into this; you never had anything to do with stealing the child, you merely stumbled onto the facts accidentally. Then what are you afraid about? You may have occasion to fear others, but not me. All I ask is the safe return of the boy, and the money is yours gladly. It’s simple business between us. So if you have any proofs here, produce them, and act like a man if you know how.”

The distrust in the banker’s voice stung the Jew.

“Maype you dink I not haf dem,” he sneered shrilly, tugging at the buttons of his coat. “Vell,

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I vill show you, und den maype you not dink me such a fool — hey! you ever see dis?”

It was a baby dress of red and black plaid, the short sleeves looped up with ribbon. The banker grasped it in his hands, his gray eyes full of interest. He turned the garment over and over.

“I — I think so,” he admitted, “yes, I am sure I have; my wife would know, but a man does not notice such things. Have you nothing else?”

The Jew brought forth a shoe, two short white stockings, and an undergarment, holding them forth, and pointing to some indelible ink signs.

“See! Is dot id? — de laundry mark? I read id ‘M — 167’; does id sound right?”

“Yes,” eagerly, scanning the dim figure with his own eyes. “That was our laundry mark while we lived at Keokuk. I remember that.” He glanced up. “But there was something else on the baby — a locket; have you got that?”

Cohen spread his hands apologetically.

“Id is lost — gone; id cannot pe found,” he explained. “I vos shown id — yes; a round locket mit a stone at its centre.”

Where Mason stood Dean could not see his face,

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but the tone of his voice was that of a man convinced, yet suspicious still of fraud.

“What you say sounds straight, Cohen, and — God knows — I hope it is. I want the boy; money is nothing to me if I can bring him back alive and well to the arms of his mother. There is no doubt but what you possess certain facts regarding him, but if you know where he is, why don’t you produce him? Are you afraid I won’t pay?”

The Jew smiled craftily.

“Sure not dot, Meester Mason; I haf you where you must pay; it vas in letters, see,” and he drew them from his pocket. “Und dey say ‘no questions asked.’ I am not fool enough to pe arrested, und so everyding vas arranged between us alone. No vun knows only us — not even your vife, hey! Vell den, listen. I tell you vy I keep not de appointment. De poy run away; we chase him up und down de river; we get him und lock him up. Den I tell you vere to come. But I go pack for him, und he got away again. Now I know vere he has gone, und in a day, a veek, I haf him vunce more. Den I send for you again. See! he will be

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dere sure — I promise you. It vas to tell you dis I came here."

Mason leaned back against the side of the house, his hands still grasping the baby garments.

"I've got to trust you, Cohen," he admitted slowly. "These certainly belonged to the little lad, and there are marks on the boy which will identify him beyond a doubt. You can have nothing to gain by lying to me." He held out the clothes. "I want to keep these; I want to show them to his mother."

"You not say who gave dem to you? I run no reesk, Meester Mason?"

"No; your name will not be mentioned. But you will hurry; you will bring us the boy as soon as you can?"

Cohen promised volubly, disappearing about the corner of the house before Dean even realized that he had gone. The dog heard him pass, however, barking savagely, and straining at his rope.

Chapter XXI

THE SEARCH BEGINS

DEAN had meant to appear, and confront Cohen, but something had restrained him too long. Little by little, as the conversation drifted to him, he began to comprehend the entire story. At first he had not recognized Mason, or even realized there was any familiarity in the name. It was only as the man chanced to lift his face that he recalled having seen him before — crossing the gang-plank to the show boat between Lucille Dean and another woman. Then it all came to him in sudden flash — Mason was the name of the man Edith Fosdyke had married, and Don was their stolen child. He had never known of that; the tragedy had occurred either since his separation from Lucille, or while he was at sea. He remembered the marriage, and the birth of a son, but nothing further. Yet this was what it must all

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mean, and Don MacGrath was the boy. He remembered now the conversation which the lad had overheard between Tom and Mag MacGrath, and his fingers stole into his pocket seeking the locket which he still retained. He looked at it again, and the recollection returned of where he had formerly seen it — at the throat of Mrs. Fosdyke, the grandmother. But was Don alive? Did Cohen actually know where the boy was? Or was he planning to substitute another, and still obtain the reward? There was one way to discover — to trail Cohen. At this thought Dean was outside almost in a moment, yet already the Jew had disappeared. As the pursuer rounded the corner of the house he came face to face with Mason, still clasping the baby garments in his hands. Dean stopped, a new plan flashing into his mind.

“Mr. Mason,” he exclaimed suddenly, ignoring the surprise on the latter’s face, “you don’t know me, but I am connected with the show troupe whose boat was burnt. That was my room up there, and I overheard some of your conversation. I know Cohen, and perhaps I can help you. Did you ever

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see that before?" He drew the locket from his pocket, and held it in the sunlight before the banker's eyes.

The man stared at it, his gaze slowly shifting to Dean's face.

"Why, yes," he said, "it was an heirloom in my wife's family."

"It was around your child's neck when he was stolen, was it not?"

"Yes," eagerly, realizing now the importance of the discovery. "Cohen just told me it could not be found. How did you gain possession of it?"

"I'll tell you in a minute all I know. Some months ago I picked up a boy down the river. He called himself Don MacGrath, and had run away from his people who were mussel fishers. We roughed it together until we got money enough to buy out the show boat. During this time we met Cohen, who had dealings with Tom MacGrath, the man who claimed to be the lad's father. Right after this we began to get into trouble, and I have some reason to believe that this man Cohen was at the bottom of it, although he managed to keep out of sight. Tom MacGrath suddenly exhibited a desire

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to get the boy back. He is a big brute of a fellow, but I fought and whipped him. Then he, with help of others, kidnapped the lad, and locked him up in a river houseboat. The boy finally got away, after overhearing a conversation which convinced him that he was not Tom MacGrath's son, but had been stolen when he was a baby, and that Cohen was endeavoring to get a big reward by returning him to his parents. The boy hunted the houseboat for some evidence of his real identity, and found that locket. We came here with the show, and Cohen and his gang followed, but kept out of sight. Then the boat burned,— I believe it was set on fire,— and the boy disappeared. Now Cohen comes to you, and swears he will bring the lad to you in a few days or a week. It means either one of two things, Mr. Mason — the boy is alive in Cohen's hands, or else the man proposes to substitute some other lad in his place for the reward."

Mason could scarcely speak, this revelation came to him so swiftly.

"You mean it was my son who took part in the entertainment on the show boat?" he questioned. "I — I remember the little girl who sang — my sis-

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ter-in-law was interested in her ; but I hardly recall the boy — what did he do?"

"He had a small character in the playlet."

"Under what name?"

"Don MacGrath."

Mason shook his head.

"I remember there was a boy, but I did not notice him much. He and the little girl have not been found since the fire. Did n't the papers say the dog was with them?"

"Yes; everything combines now to make me believe they are alive. Cohen comes to you promising to bring the boy shortly — doubtless as soon as the show-troupe leaves. The dog comes back —"

"Wounded," broke in the banker eagerly, "both shot and stabbed by a knife."

"And tries to attack Cohen the moment he gets sight of the fellow. I tell you, Mr. Mason, there is the devil's own work going on here. Cohen and MacGrath have got both boy and girl somewhere in their power, hidden away."

The men stood looking at one another, puzzled, unable to determine their best course of action.

"What is your name?" asked Mason curiously.

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"Dean."

"Oh, yes; you owned the show?"

"Don and I did together — the money came from a pearl we found accidentally. Cohen bought it from us. That was how he discovered where the boy was. They have been shadowing us ever since. What reward did you offer Cohen?"

"Twenty thousand dollars," the banker replied hesitatingly, "and I would give it to any one who brought us back our child — it's yours, if you can accomplish it."

"Mine!" and Dean straightened up, indignantly. "Do you think I'd touch your money? Why, man, I love the boy; he's as much to me as he is to you, and I'll find him if he is alive, but not for money. Never mind; it's all right; only don't say anything like that again to me." He stopped abruptly, and in the silence the dog howled. The actor's face changed expression.

"Mr. Mason," he said soberly, "the dog will turn the trick for us. He'll either follow Cohen, or lead us back over his own trail to where his mistress is. Wait here until I find Haywood; Rover will do anything he tells him to."

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He was gone for ten minutes, and the banker went in and untied the dog, coming back to the corner holding tightly to the rope. Something about Dean's manner, his quickness of decision, awoke confidence. But so wrapped up was he in his own affairs — in the possibility of an immediate recovery of his lost child — that everything else was blotted out, forgotten. In spite of his knowledge of Lucille's interest in the identity of Dean, he felt no curiosity to question him, no suspicion he was other than a stranger. His mind was far too closely concentrated upon his own affairs to give thought elsewhere just then.

Dean returned at last, dragging Billy after him, endeavoring to explain the whole situation in a few words. Tired and sleepy, his face haggard, the latter seemed scarcely able to comprehend, until the delighted dog leaped toward him, barking an hysterical welcome.

"Yes, it's actually Rover!" he exclaimed, his face flushing with excitement. "He's come back — come back; down, old fellow! down! Yes, I understand now, Mark. You think Laila is alive, held prisoner somewhere. But who could want to do

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harm to my little girl?" He looked about questioningly into Mr. Mason's face. "Oh, yes, you think it was Don they were after. That's more likely. What is it you mean to do?"

"Send the dog back over the trail, Billy," exclaimed Dean, gesticulating to make his meaning clear. "See here, the poor old fellow has been shot and cut. He'll remember where it was done, and by whom; he'll know where he left Laila, and how to get back there. If you can make him understand what it is we want, all we have to do is to follow. Can't you do that?"

Haywood patted the dog's head, his lips firm set, his hand trembling.

"Of course I can. Wait a minute until I get something of Laila's. Better take a gun along, Mark, for this is liable to end in trouble. Are you going with us, Mr. Mason?"

"Certainly."

"The three of us should be enough. Here, hold the dog; I'll be right back."

He brought a short skirt, one the girl had worn to dance in on the stage, and held it before the dog's nose. The animal sniffed at it, whining

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softly, his eyes on Haywood's face. The latter let the rope run through his fingers until he merely held the last strand.

"Find her, Rover," he said eagerly, "find her, old boy."

The animal barked, circling about at the rope's end, watching Haywood intently.

"Go on," pointing down the river, and then patting the skirt. "Seek her, old fellow."

As though comprehending at last what was demanded of him, the dog barked again, a joyous note in the sound, turned sharply, and trotted up the road, fairly dragging Billy after him.

Chapter XXII

TO THE MOUTH OF THE CAVE

IT was growing late in the afternoon, the sun well in the west. The dog, apparently relying more upon scent than any instinct as to direction, led the little party back along the same path by which he had come — directly up the bluff, along the quiet street on which the Fosdyke house stood, and then southward into the country road that ran a short distance back from the river. At first he strained at his leash, almost dragging Haywood after him, but before the crest had been attained, this eagerness changed to a fixed purpose, and the animal decreased speed to a slow trot, not difficult to follow, and advanced steadily, with nose to the ground. Again and again he glanced about to be sure the men were behind, but, finally satisfied, plodded straight ahead, ears erect and eyes on the road.

The little party passed but few on the down-town streets, who glanced at them curiously, but were

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unnoticed after the first few blocks. The wagon road leading down into the valley, bordered by trees on either side and already darkening with shadow, was entirely unoccupied. They passed a house or two, barked at by farmers' dogs, but none ventured attack. Once a rabbit skurried across the track, seeking covert in the thick bushes, but Rover never varied his stride, although the muscles quivered under his hide and he whined with eagerness. Men and dog alike were filled with the one purpose, and pressed steadily on, insensible to fatigue. There could no longer be any question as to the dog's understanding of the quest. He held to the trail, nose in the dirt, as though he would retrace every inch of it; those behind could almost tell where the wounded animal had staggered from weakness, and where he had rested bleeding in the bushes. The entire panorama of that struggle was unrolled before them, just as it had been enacted in silence and suffering.

Finally they came to where the chicken had been killed, and Rover stopped at the fence, tempted even to follow his back trail into the farmer's barn lot.

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Then he circled swiftly about, found by scent where it was he had crossed the road in search for food, and tugging again at the rope, which had been hanging limp in Haywood's hand, turned sharply to the right and burrowed his way in through the bushes. It was dusk now, and more difficult to follow, but the men, grown tired by the tramp yet confident they were being led aright, dug a passage after through the thicket, until they emerged together in the more open woods beyond. Here they came upon a dim foot-path, leading directly to the bank of the river down a steep declivity. Night had fallen by this time, and everything about was desolate and silent. The nearest house was a mile distant, and they seemed in the heart of a wilderness. The rising moon barely exhibited a red rim above the horizon, yet shed a faint light across the wide waters of the river. Far away, almost to the opposite shore, the gloomy shadow of a passing freight boat could be discerned, struggling up stream, a dense volume of black smoke showing against the lighter sky, and the sharp wheeze of her exhaust echoing from the distance. Rover plunged down

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the steep bank, sinking deeply into the soft sand, and the men slid after him, realizing they must be getting near their quarry and alert for action.

The dog paused, sniffing the air, and then turned down stream. A hundred yards below he stopped, rubbing his nose against some dark object at the water's edge, then looking back at Haywood with a low bark. The man stooped down, and ran his hand over the find, unable to see what it was in the darkness. The others stopped, wonderingly, staring at the dim figures.

"What is it, Billy?" questioned Dean, fearing it might be a dead body.

"Either a window shutter, or half of a blind door." He straightened up suddenly. "Say, that's what it is — those after-cabins had them; don't you remember?" A new note of hope came into his voice. "By Heavens! that's how they got away — on this thing; and here's where they came ashore."

Dean dropped on his knees, feeling with his fingers along the wet slats, and then waded out to where the outer end floated in the shallow water. Something soft, a bit of fluttering rag, met his

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hand, and he tore it loose from the splinter that held it.

"I believe you're right, Billy," he exclaimed, striving to make out what it was he held. "And the kids were together when they got away; see here, if that ain't a bit of flounce from an underskirt I'm badly mistaken. It must have been Laila's, and she never flung this door overboard and got on it alone. She never even learned to swim, did she, Billy? Then Don was along, you can bet on that; he's like a fish in water. Besides, this door would n't hold more than one, and never would have come ashore here just floating." He shaded his eyes, and looked out over the river, beginning to silver under the moon. "Look yonder, Mason, the current is off shore."

Billy was fondling the bit of torn flounce with loving fingers, his lips trembling so he could scarcely speak.

"It's hers," he said, "I know it's hers," and he held it down to the dog's nose. "Hear the fellow whine; you can't fool him. But where can they have gone? We were along here this morning, but none of us saw this raft."

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"We never came down to the edge of the water. We were there on the ridge, and the cove hid it from view — that is where we circled back to get over the ravine. Hold tight to the dog, Billy, or he 'll break away."

Dean waded in again to the bank, careless of his dripping clothes, Rover straining at his rope. Haywood patted him gently, examining the knot.

"All right, old boy; we 'll follow; now go ahead, but easy."

They crept along the sloping edge of sand, keeping as closely as possible within the shadow of the bank, restraining the impetuosity of the dog, whose hair was beginning to bristle with excitement. Haywood wrapped the line about his hand so as to keep the eager animal in control, continually soothing him with softly whispered words. They thus advanced around a sharp jutting of the shore line, and had covered perhaps two hundred yards when they came suddenly into the mouth of a narrow ravine. Up this the dog turned, crouching low on his belly and creeping forward, as though stalking a bird. Once within the dense blackness, Dean caught Haywood by the arm.

TO THE CAVE'S MOUTH

"This must be the place," he whispered, his voice full of excitement. "We are getting close anyhow — see how the dog acts."

"What do you want to do?"

"Tie him here somewhere, and explore this ourselves. If he sees anything he'll begin barking."

They felt about in the darkness until an out-cropping root was discovered strong enough to hold the animal, unless he gnawed the rope. He submitted quietly enough to be tied, and seemed to understand Haywood's words, as the latter patted and left him.

"Quiet, now, boy, quiet," he repeated, his face against the wet nose. "Be still, and wait here like a good dog."

The bushy tail thumped against the bank, and a faint whine made answer. Looking back out of the black depths they could see the green gleam of his eyes, but he sat there on his haunches still as a statue. The path was so narrow they were compelled to advance in single file. Dean led, a revolver in his hand; behind him came Mason, similarly equipped, but Billy, who brought up the rear, grasped a short club. It was all accomplished by

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the sense of feeling, as the eyes were useless, no vestige of moonlight penetrating the depths, and Dean tested each step of the way before advancing his foot, expecting some discovery each moment. Would it be dead bodies — some ambushade — the flash of a rifle in his face? What he might encounter could not be conjectured; he could merely push steadily, silently on, his nerves tense, ready for anything. It brought back to him the old fighting spirit of naval days, his veins throbbing almost with delight. And somehow, through strange association, this intoxication of danger brought to him a sudden remembrance of Lucille. As her memory had always been with him in the old days, so it was now — his heart crying out for her through the silence.

His groping hand reached the opening of the cave, and felt vaguely about in the dark, endeavoring to determine its nature. Mason found place beside him, and the two stood, leaning forward over the ledge, fairly holding their breath as they listened for the slightest sound of guidance. It was like a tomb within — black, noiseless.

“The ravine ends here,” whispered Dean, close

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to the other's ear. "This cave is all there is left, and I'm going to try it."

He lifted himself onto the ledge, and crept forward on hands and knees. As he paused, feeling blindly about in the darkness so as to keep close to the side-wall, he could hear the faint sounds the two others made as they cautiously clambered in after him. Guided by the side-wall he pushed forward directly into the face of the bluff. Once he stood erect, and touched the roof with extended hand. The entire passage was of rock, worn smooth as by water. But floor and all were bare; nothing his fingers reached gave evidence that this hole had ever been occupied. This, with the darkness and silence, almost convinced him they were on the wrong track, when suddenly his hand touched a heavy curtain of canvas. He halted the others, muttering a swift warning to the nearest.

Chapter XXIII

THE FIGHT UNDERGROUND

IT was only by standing up, and feeling carefully along the edge of the canvas from roof to floor, that Dean comprehended its purpose. It had been hung where the cavern turned sharply to the right, and so fashioned as to exactly fit the opening, the edges buttoned down securely to iron staples driven into the rock. So closely did the heavy cloth lie as to effectually conceal any light beyond, and it was sufficiently thick to obscure sound. Whatever else they might discover here alone was evidence of occupancy, and for no legal purpose. This was clearly a hiding place, kept secret, a rendezvous for some desperate end. Mason touched him on the shoulder.

"What is it?" he asked nervously. "I hear nothing."

"There is a canvas curtain here; keep still while I work an edge loose, and find out what is beyond."

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It was drawn so tight that, in the darkness, nothing could be accomplished with the knot, but a knife severed two of the cords silently. As the canvas opened narrowly a faint gleam of yellow light became visible, stealing through the orifice, and dimly illumining their features. The others drew back into the shadow, but Dean, holding the canvas to a mere slit, pressed his eye to it, eager to discover all that the light revealed. A candle in the neck of a bottle stood upon the table, its flickering yellow flame casting a weird, uncertain light about a rock-cleft room of considerable dimensions. In one corner, on the floor, stood a lighted lantern, which may have helped the illumination slightly, although the glass was smoked black. Just within view lying close to the side-wall, shapeless under blankets, were two men sleeping. At first Dean mistook them for a pile of bed-clothes until he caught a glimpse of a hairy face, and then beheld the other as he turned heavily over. A third man sat at the table, his feet on a box, and a bottle and glass at his elbow. His face was turned the other way, but his bull neck and broad shoulders were unmistakable — he was Tom MacGrath. Nothing else was visible, the side-walls

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shadowed. In vain Dean strained his eyes in search of the boy and girl; no movement or outline revealed the presence of either. He drew back silently, touching Mason, and pressing him forward to the slit. Then Haywood took his turn, staring through the opening. The latter, as he finally drew back and his hand touched Dean's, was trembling like an aspen.

"They are not there, Mark," he whispered sobbingly. "My little girl is not there."

"Don't you think it, Billy," and Dean's fingers closed tightly over those of his friend. "We ain't seeing all of this cave from here. They've got them somewhere. Just think; they'd be no good to them dead. Don is worth twenty thousand dollars, and Cohen is never going to lose that if he can help it. All they are holding on to Laila for is because she was with the boy. They're alive all right, and in there somewhere."

"How do you know? Perhaps this is n't Cohen's gang at all?"

"Yes, but it is — that's MacGrath at the table; I don't know those others, but I do know that big brute."

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"There's only three of them," Mr. Mason said shortly. "I'm for jumping in, and having it over with."

"All right," returned Dean. "Have your knives out ready to slit this canvas when I give the word. I'll take MacGrath; you attend to the other two sleepers. Don't be afraid to hit hard, for it's likely they'll fight. Now wait a minute until I get another look."

He pressed his eye to the slit, hearing behind him the suppressed breathing of his companions and a slight shuffling of feet, as they braced themselves for the effort. But what he saw held him silent, and motionless. MacGrath was upon his feet, as though startled by some sound, his short coat pushed back showing his hand on a revolver butt, leaning slightly forward, staring at the blackness opposite. Almost at the instant two men emerged into the radius of light—a roughly dressed fellow, and Cohen. Mason, impatient at the delay, gripped Dean's shoulder.

"What are you waiting for?"

"Hush!" shading his lips with one hand.
"Listen now."

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MacGrath spoke first, his gruff voice plainly audible.

"Oh, it's you, is it! Well, you've been long enough coming. Go on back in the tunnel, Dan." He sank back into his seat. "Did you see Mason?"

"Sure," and Cohen's shriller voice had a note of content in it. "He vas easy. All we've got to do now is to hold on to de kid a few days, und den cop de yellow poys."

"What about the show people?"

"They're hanging around yet, but haf about decided dat de poy und girl are both drowned. I tell you vat, Tom, I'm beginning to dink you did a goot job settin' their boat afire. Id's goin' to leave us an open field — de whole caboodle are dead broke, und can't hang on here long. Once rid of dem dere's no danger at all in dis job. Pass me a drink."

There followed a moment's silence, Cohen shaking the bottle, and then pouring some of its contents into the glass. One of the sleeping men lifted his head, glanced toward the table, and lay down again, MacGrath staring moodily at his boots.

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"An' yer want me ter sit back in this hole fer a week," he asked savagely, "guardin' kids?"

"Pretty goot vages at dot," replied the other, regarding him craftily. "More dan yer ever made before. Still, I don't know as dere 's any need of yer lying here doin' nuthin', Tom. Dan 's enough to keep de two locked up, und fed."

"What else is there to do?"

Cohen swung his hand to the left with a suggestive gesture which the other evidently understood.

"Strikes me id vould n't pe a pad time to run dot stuff across de river," he said, lowering his voice slightly. "We 're gittin' quite a lot chucked away dere, und after to-night the moon won't be up to hurt. You und de two fellows yonder could get id all over in a few nights."

"Where — to ol' Grotan's?"

"Yah; you 've peen dere pefore; vunce in his varehouse, he 'll attend to selling id."

"What 's it all worth, do yer suppose?"

"Oh, a tousand er two for our share, maype. Grotan gets de petter part of de profit, but yer can't

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help dat — a 'fence' always does. Besides, he runs a risk shippin' it along mit his own stuff to St. Louis. He 'll get caught some day."

"A thousand, er two," growled MacGrath. "What are yer givin' us, Cohen? The stuff we got outer the *Sultana* was worth twice that, besides those bolts o' silk swiped from the Mercantile Company's store, an' the haul we made down at Barnes' Landin'—there was nigh a wagon load o' that."

"Junk mostly; Grotan won't gif much for id. Id 's de silk, und dat sort, he 's villing to pay up for. Dat sells straight for cash, und they 're glad to get id — de rest has to be peddled out in small lots. Vell, Tom, vat you say? I vant to go pack to town, where I can keep an eye on dese show fellows."

MacGrath glanced back over his shoulder at the two sleepers.

"All right," he said sullenly, "might just as well have my share of the swag now, for I 'm goin' to skip this country as soon as this kid game is up. There 's more doin' down river."

Cohen, apparently satisfied with the arrange-



Cohen stopped, cowering back, as Dean sprang at him



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ments, and anxious to get away, poured himself another drink and rose to his feet.

"Vere yer keepin' dem?" he asked carelessly. "In mit de plunder?"

MacGrath nodded, never changing his attitude or glancing up, and Cohen walked across, apparently straight toward where the three watchers were lying. So assured was Dean the keen-eyed Jew had seen them, or else meant to pass out that way, that he sprang to his feet, slashed the canvas curtain with his knife, and stepped through the opening into the glow of light. Cohen stopped as though shot, cowering back, his lips uttering one cry. Dean sprang at him, but the Jew dodged his grasp just as MacGrath swept the candle from the table. Except for the dim sputter of the smoke-begrimed lantern in the corner the cave was in darkness, the figures of its occupants almost indistinguishable. What followed was confusion, never clearly understood by the participants—dark outlines of men in the gloom; curses and blows; muffled revolver shots; the stifling, pungent smoke of powder; a cry of pain; the whack

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of Haywood's club; and Dean's voice shouting orders as though he led a charge of blue-jackets.

"Take the left, Mason! Stay where you are, Billy, and keep 'em in! Hit first — shoot if you have to! Now go at it! — oh, you will, will you!"

The flash of flame was in his very eyes, but the bullet sang past, and before the fellow could leap back out of reach he was knocked with a crash to the floor. Dean strode over him, reaching out for Cohen. Instead of the little Jew it was MacGrath who met him, met him with the mad rush of a bull, bellowing with rage. By some accident the actor gripped the hand holding the revolver, still smoking from its last discharge, but even as he did so, his own was dashed from his fingers, and they were fighting like wolves. It was fierce and swift, the giant strength of the river-man offset by the wiry quickness of Dean. Crushed almost to suffocation, he hung to the wrist of his opponent, twisting the hand downward, and then, nearly dead himself, snapped the revolver hammer. At the report MacGrath tumbled backward, dragging his enemy with him, but relaxing his grip as his body struck the floor. Panting for breath, his

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throat livid from the giant's finger-marks, Dean staggered to his feet. Some one fired from the shadow of the wall, the flash lighting the whole cave, and he went down again across MacGrath's body, conscious that his side burned as though scorched by fire. His head swam dizzily, but he heard a rush of feet, two more shots, a blow, and then all about him was silence.

Chapter XXIV

RECOVERY OF THE CHILDREN

CRUSHING back the sense of numbness and pain, Dean partially lifted himself, and half supported by MacGrath's body, was able to look about. The cave interior, rendered barely visible by the blackened lantern, 'was obscured by smoke, so nothing could be discerned clearly beyond a few feet. To his right a man with a revolver was holding two other men rigid against the wall, their hands uplifted, while just in front a figure staggered to its feet, reeling as though still dazed from the effects of a blow — Haywood beyond a doubt.

"Billy," Dean called, "find the candle on the floor there, and light it; let's see what we've got."

The voice served to rally the bewildered man, and in another moment the lighted candle helped to sweep away the shadows. Then, for the first time, Haywood perceived Dean.

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"What 's the matter, Mark? — hurt?"

"Caught a bullet somewhere — in the side the way it feels. Anyhow I can't move. Go over and help Mason with those fellows. Find a rope, and tie them up."

His eyes followed these operations a moment, his mind growing clearer. Then he felt of the body against which he lay; it was pulseless — the bullet from his own gun had gone crashing to the heart of the river-man. Dean drew away from contact with the dead form, holding himself to a sitting posture by clasping the leg of the table. His head reeled dizzily, and his wound throbbed, yet, by the power of nerve alone, he assumed command, his mind grasping each detail.

"Search them for guns; that 's right, make the knot tight. Here, Mason, hand me a revolver. Now I can watch them, if I can't do anything else. Hurt much, Billy?"

Haywood felt his head in uncertainty.

"Somebody hit me on the coco," he returned. "Did n't know much for a minute."

"Who are those fellows?"

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"Never saw them before — river rats, from their looks."

"Well," said Dean slowly, "there were five here when we broke in, and only three now — Mac-Grath's dead. The fellow on guard probably got out through that hole yonder, but what's become of Cohen? Any one seen him?"

"He must have been the boy who hit me," cried Billy, waking up to a sudden burst of anger, "and then skipped through the curtain. I'll find out."

He plunged through the slit in the canvas into the outer cave. There was a moment's silence; then a sudden exclamation, followed by a roar of laughter. Dean and Mason stared at the concealing curtain.

"What the deuce is he roaring like that about? — hey, Billy!"

"All right, I've got him!" came the reply, the voice still choked with merriment. "Come on, you measly little runt. Let go! Let go, I tell you!"

There were sounds of a brief struggle, a savage growl, a shriek from Cohen, a blow, and then Billy reappeared, dragging the Jew after him. Following the two, crouching along almost on his belly, was Rover, a dangling bit of chewed rope attached

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to his collar. Haywood jerked his squirming prisoner to a sitting posture on the floor. Cohen was certainly a woe-begone object, his clothing rags, trembling so he could not even speak. Billy stood between him and the dog, whose blood-shot eyes never left the Jew.

"What are you laughing at?" questioned Dean sharply, almost touched by pity at Cohen's appearance. "Did the dog get him?"

"I should say yes; had him down on his back just inside. Must have chewed his rope off, and got away just as Cohen broke out. He ain't hurt him none, only half frightened him to death. But say, Mark, where 's the kids?"

It was Rover who answered; some familiar scent had reached his nostrils, driving from his dog mind all memory of Cohen. The bristles of his back flattened, and his falling lip hid the white gleam of teeth. With a short bark he sprang forward over MacGrath's body, plunged into a black shadow, and began whining. Mason and Haywood followed, Dean straining his eyes to see. There was a door there, fitted into the rock and painted the same gray color, so as to be indistinguishable a few

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feet distant. At first it resisted all efforts; then they utilized a gun barrel as a lever, and burst the lock. Blinded by the light the two children were drawn forth, Haywood's eyes dimmed with tears as he clasped Laila in his arms, and the dog barking about frantic with joy. Mason, hardly knowing what to do or what to say, dragged the bewildered Don into the full light of the candle, studying the lineaments of the boy's face — for the moment he forgot everything else but the lad's identity.

"My boy! my boy!" he sobbed, his voice barely audible. "Do you know me? Do you know who I am?"

Don choked, struggling to answer.

"No, sir! — that is, I'm not sure — are you my father?"

"Yes, I am! I know it; I can see the mother in your eyes. I don't need any other proofs. Oh, poor Edith, what a day this will be for her! My little laddie!"

He drew him closer, fondling the lad's hair, calling him some pet name of childhood. No one

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else moved, Laila lying silent in Haywood's arms, her cheek against his, the dog's nose in her lap.

"Father," asked the boy, at last, "what is your name? What is my name?"

"It is Mason, sonny; you are Don Mason."

"Don? How did they ever know? How did they come to call me that?"

The banker hesitated; then the remembrance came to him.

"It must have been from the locket," he said, speaking slowly, and trying to remember. "Did you ever see the picture that was in it?"

Don shook his head.

"No; when Mr. Dean opened it there was no picture."

"There was when you were stolen from the nurse — a picture of you, and your mother, and written on it was 'Little Don.'"

In the hush which followed Dean spoke, just a trace of bitterness in his voice.

"This seems to be an exceedingly pleasant occasion for all except Cohen and me. We're not having such a good time, are we, Isadore?" The Jew

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scowled at him, muttering, and the wounded man laughed. "I see you agree with me; say, Mason, and you too, Billy, some of you might remember I'm hurt! Let's get things straightened up."

Haywood was on his feet instantly.

"You're right, Mark!" he exclaimed anxiously. "We've got the kids; now what's next?"

During the excitement of the night Mason had not distinguished this name, but now he heard it clearly, with full realization of its meaning — this was the man then, Lucille's husband.

"Are you Mark Dean?"

"Certainly," in surprise at the sudden recognition, "I'm not travelling under an alias — why?"

"Because there is a woman in that town yonder who has n't forgotten you."

"Has n't — has n't forgotten me? — has n't forgotten? What — what is it you mean?"

"Just that, Mark Dean," soberly, "you had a wife, do you remember? a dark-eyed, slender girl, who married you at Washington. She's back yonder in the town, and she has not forgotten — have you?"

Dean stared at him in the dim candle-light, try-

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ing to speak; then his head sank down into his hands, his face hidden. Don crept across from the side of his father to that of his friend, his eyes bright.

"I know he has n't," he exclaimed triumphantly. "I know he has n't, for he told me so. He's just ashamed because he's a showman, and has n't any money. Won't you tell them what you told me, Mr. Dean?"

The pleading in the boy's voice was irresistible, and Dean lifted his eyes to the face of his questioner.

"No, Mason," he said slowly, and his hand rested on Don's shoulder. "I have not forgotten, and I never can. I thought she had! that she had blotted me from her life. Still I would have gone back to her long ago — facing my fate like a man — only everything has been wrong with me since we parted. I lost heart, ambition, hope, and just drifted. Perhaps you can't understand, but — but I could n't face her, after what had happened. It was my fault — I know it now. And you say she has not forgotten? You — you mean Lucille loves me still?"

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"Beyond a doubt she does."

There was a mist before his eyes, his wound throbbing; slowly his head sank until his cheek touched Don's hair. Only the boy heard his lips whisper, "Lucille, Lucille," and then he toppled over unconscious.

Chapter XXV

HOME AT LAST

IT was in the gray chill of dawn — a gloomy, cloud-shaded dawn — that the little party came forth on the country road. A nearby farmer had been awakened, and his wagon, well filled with hay, was sufficient to transport them all. The body of MacGrath was left lying where it had fallen, and the farmer's hired man remained near, on guard over the stolen property which the cave contained, until the sheriff of the county could take possession.

Bound securely, Cohen, utterly broken-spirited and whimpering like a whipped child, together with the two river toughs, one with head bandaged, was at the rear, the watchful Rover eying every movement, occasionally uttering a deep growl to make them aware of his presence. Dean lay in the soft hay, his head pillowed on Don's lap, while Laila snuggled close, wiping the drops of perspiration from his face whenever some jolting

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of the wagon gave him a special twinge of pain. Suffering as he was bodily, it was evident the man was mentally happy, the exultation of success loosening his tongue.

"We have played the play to the last curtain," he rambled on, the fever in his veins making him partly incoherent. "Behold the villain about to atone for his crime; the lost child returned to the bereaved parents; the whole company assembled to see justice done. Billy, saw you ever on the stage a nobler ending?"

"It needs but one thing more," admitted Haywood, "the heroine reunited with her lover."

Mason's eyes met Dean's, the flash of intelligent meaning between them causing the latter to revolt.

"This has been no love story," he contended stoutly, "nor shall it end like one. No, no, Mason; I know what you are tempted to say, and what you plan to do. But I have got my senses now, and will never permit it. I'm wounded, and therefore in a measure helpless to resist, but there is a hospital in town, and that is where you are going to leave me."

"But Lucille would never forgive."

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"Oh, yes, she would," a bit wearily. "All she said to you, Mason, was no more than the natural interest of a woman. I can understand that now. At first I grasped at the straw, like a drowning man, but now I know her words really meant nothing."

Don clasped his hand, burning hot with fever.

"Oh, Mr. Dean, don't say that; don't turn away from her now, and go back to the old life."

"Why not, Donnie, boy?"

"Because it is not right. Laila and I know she cares, don't we, Laila? Besides it will spoil everything for me to think of you drifting around alone."

"Would it, lad?" his voice low and tender. "We have been good chums, have n't we? But that's all over with. You've got your chance in the world now, and are going to make the most of it. I've got to find a new path for myself. But you must let me do it my own way. No, lad, I am not going back to her as I am — ragged, wounded, a failure, begging for charity. That's not Mark Dean. I've got something to hold tight to now, and I'm going to win back my own self-respect first of all; then I can go to her, and look

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into her eyes like a man. Don't urge me, you fellows; I'm too weak to fight, but I am not going to her as a stranded showman."

He sank back onto Don's shoulder, totally exhausted, his cheeks colorless, his eyes closed. Only as the jolts of the wagon caused him to exhibit the sharp twinges of pain did he seem conscious. The team pulled them slowly forward, scarcely another word being spoken. All were tired by the long struggle and thinking over the events of the night. It was useless to combat Dean's resolve, and indeed, he was so near delirium as to make further conversation valueless. Quietly Mason determined to take matters into his own hands, and whispered a few words to Haywood. The showman nodded, his eyes brightening, as he beckoned Laila to come back where they were. The girl crept silently through the hay, until they were able to whisper to her the details of their hasty plan. From her glowing cheeks, her fluttering gestures, and quick glance toward the unconscious Dean, she evidently entered eagerly into the scheme proposed. They were climbing the long hill, leading up to the residential portion of the town, the heavy

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farm team walking slowly. Avoiding contact with the prisoners, Laila made her way to the rear of the wagon box, and dropped to the ground. Haywood restrained the dog as he attempted to follow, and the girl ran around to the side of the road, waving her hand to Don, who failed to understand this new movement. Dean lay with one arm shading his eyes, seeing and hearing nothing. Moving swiftly the girl hastened ahead of them up the hill, and Don watched the fluttering of her skirts until she disappeared over the crest. Suddenly the secret of her mission occurred to him, and his heart thrilled — she was going to tell Mrs. Dean.

At the summit of the long rise Mason signalled the driver to keep straight ahead. It was by now nearly noon, the sky clouded, and, except for a delivery cart or two, the street deserted. The long ride, the continuous jolting, had left Dean so faint and worn that he lay motionless, except for the twinges of pain contracting his face. His wound, painful rather than dangerous, afforded him little opportunity for thought; all he yearned for was some surcease of suffering — the road seemed endless. The girl had vanished, and the lumbering

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wagon, bearing its strange assortment of humanity, creaked slowly forward. They were before the Fosdyke home, almost past it, when Laila and Mrs. Dean suddenly emerged from the gate. Mason checked the driver, and the team stopped. The woman came hastily forward, forgetful of the dust, her head bare, her eyes bright with anxiety.

"Charles, is it true that Mark is here, and wounded?"

The eyes of the half-unconscious man opened staring up into Don's face.

"Whose voice was that?" he asked, almost convinced it was a dream. "It — it sounded like Lucille."

With a single step she was opposite him, looking over the side of the low wagon box, down into his drawn face flushed with fever. She had forgotten the others, everything; she knew now she cared for no one else in all the world as she did for this man.

"Oh, Mark! Mark!" she sobbed, and her hands clasped his. "I have wanted you so long."

All the man's pride, obstinacy, fled before the pathos of that cry; an instant he gazed at her, be-

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wildered, unable to articulate; then his eyes moistened.

"Oh, I can't," he faltered weakly, "I am not worthy."

"Hush," and her soft palm was upon his lips. "You are my husband now and always — come!"

What more is there to add? The boyhood of Don MacGrath was ended, and Don Mason stood upon the threshold of a new life, knowing himself, strengthened by experience, welcomed home as though returning from the dead. Dean, recovering from his wound, became a civil engineer of prominence, and Laila, helped and encouraged by the Masons, found doors of opportunity opening before her. So out of darkness Don came into the light, his blessings reflected in the lives of others — his friends in adversity.

THE END

